BEYOND GREEN

toward a sustainable art
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Curated by Stephanie Smith

SMART MUSEUM OF ART
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
INDEPENDENT CURATORS INTERNATIONAL
NEW YORK

Allora & Calzadilla
Free Soil
JAM
Learning Group
Brennan McGaffey in collaboration with Temporary Services
Nils Norman
People Powered
Dan Peterman
Marjetica Potrč
Michael Rakowitz
Frances Whitehead
WochenKlausur
Andrea Zittel
Published to accompany the traveling exhibition
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Smart Museum of Art
University of Chicago
5550 South Greenwood Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637
773.702.0200
http://www.smartmuseum.uchicago.edu

Independent Curators International
799 Broadway, Suite 205
New York, NY 10003
212.254.8200
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Organizing a traveling exhibition that addresses the intersection between sustainable design and contemporary art poses particular challenges: how to be thrifty and environmentally conscious in presenting, interpreting, packing, and shipping works of art. This problem would be germane only to those of us in the business of art exhibitions if it did not also speak to the ways in which we as a society and as individuals consume resources in an increasingly globalized sphere of interactions. These days, we order furniture produced on the other side of the world and have the pieces shipped to us from distant warehouses, eat produce grown on different continents, and buy clothes made from fabrics woven and tailored across the globe. It takes effort to go past superficial understandings of “green living” in order to live in a truly sustainable way.

The artists in *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art* bring these questions into the production and circulation of their own work. We thank them for creating a remarkable array of projects and for sharing them through this exhibition. These artists offer counterto established forms of environmentally conscious art: rather than large-scale interventions, they explore sustainability at a more modest, portable level. Some adopt proven principles of “green” design. Others propose small-scale, alternative modes of living. Still others incisively highlight the problems and contradictions of the very discourse of sustainability. Absent from *Beyond Green* are more familiar forms such as community gardens, planning projects, or public art. Though all of the artists have, in fact, worked site-specifically, with particular communities, epistemically, or outside the boundaries of art museums, the works presented in *Beyond Green* demonstrate a specific curatorial choice to feature another side of these practices: structures, objects, and processes that can be used and reused in a range of contexts and can be experienced directly by visitors at each exhibition tour venue. The curatorial approach to *Beyond Green* thus brings recycling—one strategy of sustainability—into the world of art.

Collaboration—another critical element of sustainable living—has permeated all levels of planning for *Beyond Green*. This complex exhibition has required intense levels of collaboration among curator, artists, and many others, and we thank Stephanie Smith for her curatorial vision and dedication as she knitted together not only the content of the show, catalogue, and accompanying programs, but also the networks of people and relationships that have shaped *Beyond Green*. Likewise, the partnership between the Smart and Independent Curators International has enabled us to leverage resources to make possible the exhibition, tour, and catalogue as well as related programs. In Chicago, where this project initially took shape, we benefited from the early involvement of several individuals, groups, and university departments. We are especially grateful to Dave Aftandilian of the University of Chicago’s Environmental Studies Program, the Chicago Architecture Foundation and its curator Ned Cramer, Ken Dunn of the Resource Center, Peter Nicholson of Foresight Design Group, and Kevin Pierce of the architecture firm Farr Associates, for their ongoing feedback, ideas, enthusiasm, and support, which significantly extended the range and reach of the exhibition. We are also grateful to the University of Chicago’s Green Campus Initiative, the Department of Visual Arts, the Environmental Studies Program, the Office of Community and Government Affairs, the University Community Service Center, and the Workshop on the Built Environment for pushing beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries to help us involve audiences in tackling real problems of art and sustainable design. Without them, most of the programs presented in conjunction with *Beyond Green* in Chicago would not have been possible. We extend special thanks to the artists who participated.
Finally, we extend our warmest appreciation to the trustees of the Smart Museum of Art and of Independent Curators International for their continuing support, enthusiasm, and commitment to our respective institutions. They join us in expressing our appreciation to everyone who recognized the importance of this project and gave generously in so many ways to ensure its success.

This exhibition is an especially appropriate collaboration for our two institutions, as it draws on a shared commitment to presenting significant developments in contemporary art in relation to current cultural trends and issues. It continues a series of exhibitions organized by Stephanie Smith for the Smart Museum of Art that explore critical art practice—conceptual and socially engaged work involving multiple constituencies, sites of production, and strategies for collaboration. Likewise, ICI’s program of traveling exhibitions of contemporary art takes as one of its priorities a focus on critical issues in artistic and curatorial practice. Beyond Green builds on these histories by introducing us to exciting artistic developments and providing a new way of seeing art within a framework of sustainability. Even as they speculate in other disciplines, the works in Beyond Green can be best understood as artwork, not as design, architecture, or activism. They are for the most part provisional rather than practical, polemical and often playful, yet entirely serious meditation on how we can use the resources at hand to sustain responsible living.

Anthony Hirschel
Dana Felletter Director
Smart Museum of Art
University of Chicago

Judith Olch Richards
Executive Director
Independent Curators International
New York

FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

in several ambitious university programs inspired by the exhibition: a summer 2005 course on art and activism that artist Kevin Kaempf of People Powered taught for high school students in the university’s Collegiate Scholars Program; Nils Norman’s fall 2005 residency teaching an interdisciplinary course on art and environmental activism; and WöchenKlausur’s intensive three-week residency during summer 2005 to create their exhibition project with the help of a team of university students (listed on page 142).

None of this would be possible without the support of visionary funders. We sincerely thank the Smart Family Foundation, the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, and the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, as well as ICI Exhibition Partners Gertie and Sydelle Lansing, and Ken Kuchin and Bruce Anderson, for their generous support of this project. We also thank the Arts Planning Council at the University of Chicago for encouraging greater involvement by university students through their grant. The Smart also acknowledges the critical support of the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; Nuveen Investments; and Tom and Janis McCormick and the Kanter Family Foundation for their support of Smart Museum exhibitions. We offer them our deep thanks.

We also thank Susan and Michael Hert for lending work to the exhibition. Additional thanks are due to Chantal Crousel Galerie, Klosterfelde Gallery, Lisson Gallery, Lombard Freid Projects, Galerie Christian Nagel, Max Protetch Gallery, and Andrea Rosen Gallery for their support of the artists’ work and their ongoing assistance with Beyond Green. Josie Brown at Max Protetch and Susanna Greeves at Andrea Rosen deserve additional thanks for their assistance in facilitating loans.

We also thank those who made special contributions to this catalogue. Victor Margolin offered support and expertise during the book’s conception and production. His essay allows us to consider the ideas put forth in the exhibition within the context of an expansive framework of social, ecological, and political involvements with sustainability. Jason Pickleman of JNL Design translated the concepts of the exhibition into graphics and catalogue, providing a visual identity to the project as it travels. From the beginning, he understood and embraced the challenges of designing a book that articulated sustainable design in both form and content. Greg Nosan provided excellent editorial guidance.

Many individuals on both our staffs have contributed their professional skills, creativity and enthusiasm to planning, fundraising, catalogue production, presentation, programming, and touring. At the Smart we offer special thanks to deputy director for collections, programs, and interpretation Jacqueline Terrassa, who shepherded the project during her term as interim director and worked closely with Stephanie Smith to develop the programs that accompany the exhibition’s Chicago presentation; project interns Sara Black, Rachel Fumari, and Kristin Love Grear for their skill, dedication, and grace under pressure; deputy director for development and external affairs Shaleane See; public relations and marketing director Christine Carino; manager of education programs Amanda Ruch; and the registration and preparations staff who so ably addressed the special requirements of this exhibition—Lindsay Artwick, Rudy Bernal, and David Ingerthon. At ICI, we thank director of exhibitions Susan Hapgood, former exhibitions associate Amy Owen, exhibitions assistant Ramona Piagentini, registrar Beverly Parsons, and intern Erica Hope Fisher for their management of this complex exhibition, catalogue, and tour; director of development Hedy Roma and development assistants Hilary Fry and Katie Holden for skilful fundraising efforts; and communications coordinator Sue Scott for her public relations work.

Finally, we extend our warmest appreciation to the trustees of the Smart Museum of Art and of Independent Curators International for their continuing support, enthusiasm, and commitment to our respective institutions. They join us in expressing our appreciation to everyone who recognized the importance of this project and gave generously in so many ways to ensure its success.

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Sustainable design has the potential to transform our everyday lives through an approach that balances environmental, social, economic, and aesthetic concerns. This emerging strategy emphasizes the responsible and equitable use of resources and links environmental and social justice. By doing so, it moves past a prior generation of more narrowly eco-centered or “green” approaches. Although still a fledgling movement, this holistic, ethical, pragmatic, and wildly inventive mode has the potential to redirect design toward progressive ends, a phenomenon that designer Bruce Mau succinctly dubbed “massive change.” This shift derives from and speaks to a much more widespread desire to find socially and environmentally responsible—in other words, sustainable—ways of living and working, a desire being enacted around the world in large and small ways not only by activists and designers but also by growing numbers of corporations, policy makers, and possibly even you.

Beyond Green explores some of the ways in which contemporary artists also grapple with this impulse to build a more sustainable future (whether or not they think this is actually possible). This exhibition does not survey all such efforts. Rather, it calls attention to a florescence of recent art making that resonates with the considerations at the heart of sustainable design. The project brings together thirteen artists and artists’ groups based in the United States and Europe, leaving it to others to explore work coming from other parts of the world (sustainability seems likely to become a strong current among artists living and working in rapidly industrializing economies such as China’s, for instance). It is important to note that environmental concerns are part of the mix of these artists’ practices, but just that—they have no desire to be labeled as “eco” or “green” or even “sustainable” artists. They work in an expanded field, blending art, activism, and design to varying degrees. This exhibition focuses on only one strand of this art by presenting objects, structures, and processes/networks that use aspects of sustainable design to metaphoric, practical, speculative, ironic, and playful ends.

Green as the new black
About five years ago, I began to notice hybrid electric-gas cars on Chicago’s streets. A few years later, a new logo cropped up at gas stations around the city: the green-and-yellow surburst that introduced British Petroleum’s new incarnation as self-proclaimed, eco-friendly “bp,” purveyor not only of petrochemicals but also of solar power (their ad campaign initially touted their capacity to move “beyond petroleum”). Around the same time, the city government launched a campaign to make Chicago “the greenest city in America,” and national magazines like Dwell began to feature eco-chic design strategies. This trend toward the greening of corporate practice, civic policy, and consumer desire has continued at a rapid pace. New advertising campaigns promoting eco-conscious corporate practices are rampant, and on a more personal level, we can purchase all kinds of goods for a green lifestyle much more easily than we could just a few years ago: even my decidedly gritty local grocery now sells organic milk.

What to make of all this green? Its return to (relatively) mainstream fashion—especially after a stretch through the 1980s and 1990s when environmental concerns languished at the fringes of social attention—might seem purely positive. However, it detached from a broader set of pragmatic and ethical considerations, green practices might be just another trend: a fleeting surface treatment rather than a deep and demonstrable good. (Activists, for instance, stay alert for “greenwashing,” in which corporations highlight their environmentally friendly practices primarily as a public...
relations device without significantly changing their overall business practices). Green tactics only address one strand of a complex problem. In these globalized times, a more holistic approach seems a sensible and necessary response to the deep interconnection among human activities and other “natural” systems.8

Sustainable design offers such an approach. It grows out of a broader set of policies and theories about sustainability that have developed over the past three decades. To meld two of the definitions that design historian Victor Margolin provides in his essay in this catalogue, sustainability involves meeting the needs of the present without sacrificing the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs, and doing so with equal attention to social and environmental justice.9 Theorist Tony Fry prefers to think in less anthropocentric terms; he asks “is the essential project ‘sustainable development’ (the reform of the existing methods of development, but retaining its fundamental objectives) or ‘the development of sustainment’ (redirecting development toward a very different basis for the creation of economy, society, and a relation between human beings, the artificial worlds they create, and the biosphere)?” Despite these differences of emphasis, both definitions underscore the need for change and the capacity for human action to enact it.

Sustainable design puts such thinking into practice by reimagining the ways we live and the stuff of daily life: structures such as offices, homes, and other buildings; objects such as tools, books, clothes, and cars; and processes and networks such as transportation and recycling systems. In doing so, it utilizes many established elements of green design, such as the use of recycled materials and renewable energy sources. But to reiterate, sustainable design posits that a purely green approach, which considers environmental questions in isolation from other factors, is incomplete and ineffective. Ethics have to be considered, along with a pragmatic attention to the entire life cycle of any designed thing from its production, through its useful life, to its disassembly and whole or partial reuse. Although sustainable design practices are gaining footholds in societies around the world through personal, civic, and even corporate efforts, the complexity of our current situation means that massive change is indeed necessary and only just starting to percolate in the face of many and persistent obstacles.

A sustainable art? One can easily see how this sort of design might affect daily life. But how does it resonate with art making and particularly with the art presented in Beyond Green? At any given moment, artists have access to a relatively limited set of visual languages and conceptual strategies, picking up on or pushing against them. These must be considered along with the broader cultural context—the widespread desire for a more sustainable future—mentioned earlier.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, large numbers of artists began favoring ideas over objects and devising works for sites other than gallery and museum spaces. Growing out of this shift, and in tandem with wider phenomena such as the lingering effects of 1960s countercultural experiments and a growing sense of urgency around environmental problems, some artists began to pursue land art: environmentally based projects informed by conceptual and site-specific modes of art making. Earthworks, for instance, presented as land art—consisted of works sculpted in (and in fact, from) remote or pastoral landscapes and often made no obvious environmental claims.7 Other examples from this period were informed by more explicitly pragmatic and didactic purposes, focusing for instance on the impact of human development on particular ecosystems.8 Since the late 1970s, increasing numbers of environmental projects have dealt not only with such out-of-the-way sites but also with towns and urban centers.1 One common trait of these diverse works—apart from their engagement with environmental material—has been their emphasis on particular places.

Whether or not the artists in Beyond Green directly refer to these predecessors, their work must be considered in relation to and in distinction from them, and one key difference concerns this issue of site specificity. Many of the Beyond Green artists have worked in such modes, which remain a rich part of contemporary practice. They also work, however, with a more nomadic sensibility exemplified by the mobile structures, objects, and processes/networks featured in this exhibition. Such works might have a generative connection to a particular spot, but they can mutate and adapt over time and in new places. Additionally, many address the contested spaces of contemporary cities and towns and thus might be seen as extending that strand of environmental work that emphasizes populated places rather than remote ones. Such projects chip away at perceptions that “the environment” is something “out there” and that cities are not as deeply connected to other ecosystems as they are to global trade networks. They reflect the current reality that as far-flung people and places become more entwined, ever-spread populations and communications networks reduce the number of places that might qualify as “out there.” (They also remind us that, for all their flaws, cities have some innate characteristics—for instance, the pooling of resources made possible by density—that can be amplified into sustainable spaces.)

In addition to site-specific and environmentally focused predecessors and parallels, the artists of Beyond Green should also be considered in relation to two aspects of European and American art during the 1990s that have an even more direct relationship to their work: the rise of critical practice and the fertile crossover between art and design.

Critical practice in art can be defined as an ethically based, conceptually grounded approach that addresses the social sphere from a position of critique and does so by embracing process as well as product. As artist and critic Dan S. Wang writes, what critical practices share is a fundamental aspiration: to present questions and challenges about the way the world is, the ways we perceive it, and the ways in which we can act in it. These questions or challenges might be presented in general terms or with respect to a particular social detail or situation. This aspiration can be described as inherently critical, because the inescapable implication is that a world with different social arrangements, behaviors, or both is possible.10

Of course there is nothing new about that pull toward relevance, the impulse to grapple with the pressing questions of one’s time and even to use creative endeavors as a means to enact social change. That desire recurs again and again in art, but it finds varied manifestations among different generations and situations.11

In the 1990s, new modalities of art making channeled the urge for social engagement into particular forms. As indicated above, collaboration has been an especially important vehicle. The last decade has seen the formation of many successful artists’ groups...
Beyond green and into the museum

So what can we gain—or lose—by bringing these hybrid practices together within the particularly powerful framing space of the museum?

For museums to remain relevant, they must make space for projects that productively explore the tensions between the world “out there” and the protected precinct of the museum through works that provide the participatory engagement of the audience. Such modes of working are part of the wider artistic culture (and counterculture) of our moment, and though used by artists with differing aims, they have been particularly strong channels for critical practice, which has in turn been an especially fertile and increasingly visible presence within American and European art since the mid-to-late 1990s.

During roughly the same period, design and lifestyle emerged as another major area of investigation for European and American artists, who expanded their practices by creating functional works that drew on the visual languages and materials of fashion, architecture, and interior and product design. This blurring of boundaries paralleled the general ascendance of design as a driver of desire within popular culture. Think for instance of the popularity of lifestyle magazines that cut across wide demographics, from Readymade to Wallpaper to Martha Stewart Living, the success of the Scandinavian retailer IKEA, or Target’s promotion of itself as a low cost/high style purveyor of “design for all.” Critics Hal Foster, among others, have unpacked some of the problems of the infusion of design into so many aspects of contemporary culture, as we all become targets of increasingly focused niche marketing strategies aimed to infuse the “designed subject” with ever-greater consumer needs. Some of the artists investigating design share his concerns or have looked away from consumerist drives and toward emancipatory ways of using design that draw on the utopian ideals of past moments of art/design overlap (the Bauhaus, the Constructivists) or more directly on progressive thinkers outside the art world, such as Buckminster Fuller or Victor Papanek, author of the 1972 classic Design for the Real World. The latter strand of practice has been especially important for Beyond Green.

In many ways the ascendency of design and the rise of critical practice in art have been distinct developments; many artists exploring design as a site of investigation have no interest in engaging social questions, and many others working in a relational manner have little interest in making objects. The convergence of these two strands can provide rich opportunities for artists to create satisfying visual forms that provide new ways of embodying critical practices. And when this convergence occurs around environmental questions, it resonates strongly with sustainable design’s goal of bringing social and aesthetic concerns together with environmental and economic ones.
Thanks to my colleagues at the Smart Museum and ICI, and to Tony Fry, Peter Nicholson, Victor Margolin, and Dan S. Wang for sharing their responses to this text. I also thank Parkett editor Cay Sophie Rabinowitz for commissioning a piece for the winter 2005 issue of Parkett that provided me with an initial opportunity to explore these ideas in print.

1 See Bruce Mau, Massive Change (London: Phaidon Press, 2004).

2 Useful recent texts include Tony Fry, A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing (New South Wales University Press, 1999), Michael Braungart and William McDonough, Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things (New York: North Point Press, 2002), and “The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post Environmental World,” a 2004 paper by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus that was commissioned by the Nathan Cummings Foundation and widely distributed over the Internet.

3 See Victor Margolin’s essay in this volume, p. 2.

4 Tony Fry, email correspondence with the author, October 23, 2005.

5 Two popular conduits for ideas about sustainability, especially in relation to business, are Cradle to Cradle, (note 2) and Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins, Natural Capitalism: Creating the New Industrial Revolution (Boston: Back Bay Press, 2000).

6 Apart from the now ubiquitous Spiral Jetty, famous examples include Michael Heizer’s massive sculptural excavation into a Nevada desert, Double Negative (1969), or Richard Long’s performative work A Line Made by Waking (1967), in which he flattened a path through a grassy meadow and documented the results with a photograph. Some projects initiated in the 1970s remain works-in-progress, such as James Turrell’s Roden Crater: these iconic forms of land art remain the most well-known manifestations of environmental work, reawakening continued attention in the scholarly and popular press. Key texts include John Beardsley, Earthworks and Beyond (New York: Albion Press, 1984), Susan Rothenberg, Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wells, Land and Environmental Art (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), and Gilles Tiberghein, Land Art (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995).

7 For the former, think of Robert Smithson’s unrealized plans of the early 1970s to remediate mining sites as a sculptural project; for the latter, Joseph Beuys’s public tree planting, the 7000 Oaks Project, first realized in Kassel in 1980, or Helen and Newton Harrison’s gallery mining sites as a sculptural project; for the latter, Joseph Beuys’s public tree planting, the 7000 Oaks Project, first realized in Kassel in 1980, or Helen and Newton Harrison’s gallery mining sites as a sculptural project; for the latter, Joseph Beuys’s public tree planting, the 7000 Oaks Project, first realized in Kassel in 1980, or Helen and Newton Harrison’s gallery mining sites as a sculptural project; for the latter, Joseph Beuys’s public tree planting, the 7000 Oaks Project, first realized in Kassel in 1980, or Helen and Newton Harrison’s gallery mining sites as a sculptural project; for the latter, Joseph Beuys’s public tree planting, the 7000 Oaks Project, first realized in Kassel in 1980, or Helen and Newton Harrison’s gallery mining sites as a sculptural project; 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9 Critics such as Miwon Kwon and Claire Doherty have been useful in pushing the understanding of site-specificity; see Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity (Boston: MIT Press, 2004) and Claire Doherty, ed., From Studio to Situations: Contemporary Art and the Question of Context (London: Black Dog Press, 2004).


11 Examples as varied as nineteenth-century painter Gustave Courbet, the early-twentieth-century Russian revolutionary Constructivists, artists affiliated with the Popular Front between the first two world wars, and the 1980s work of HIV/AIDS activists Gran Fury are just a few that might be cited here.

12 Kester uses one of the artists’ groups in Beyond Green, WochenKlausur, as a primary example. See Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).


14 This is partly a function of technological changes: the Web allows autonomous artists and artists’ groups to form networks and share information more quickly than in the past so that groups like Temporary Services in Chicago can maintain an ongoing dialogue with artists, writers, and activists in Vienna, Copenhagen, Paris, or Portland. That same technology helped fuel the international antiglobalization and anti-war movements, which have produced ideas and visual strategies that have often overlapped with critical practice, as demonstrated by The Interventionists, an exhibition curated by Nato Thompson at MassMoca in 2004. Shows like Thompson’s are indicative of our situation within one of those recurring moments at which the broader art world has directed attention to socially engaged and activist practice through a developing critical and art-historical examination as well as through major museum exhibitions.

15 Some of the influential artists working in this manner include Atelier van Lieshout, Jorge Pardo, Tobias Rehberger, Joe Scanlan, Superflex, and Andrea Zittel. Such crossovers have been documented through exhibitions like the General Foundation’s Designs for the Real World (2002), the Walker Art Center’s Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life (2003), which focused on design but shares similarities with many of the practices featured in Beyond Green, and several design shows that have featured artists in Beyond Green, including the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum’s Inside Design Now: National Design Triennial (2003) and the Museum of Modern Art’s Safe Design Takes on Risk (2005).


17 I have taken this phrase from a symposium at which I discussed related issues, “Dual Commitment: Recent Examples of Public Art in Austria and the United States,” organized by the artists Wolfgang Schneider and Beatrix Zöbl and held in various sites in Linz, Salzburg, and Vienna, July 2005.

18 To extend this thought, there are many ways to generate more sustainable museums: for instance, how might we devise more energy-efficient climate control systems, or bring sustainable thinking into the often wasteful practices of exhibition design, or do more to share resources and strengthen networks with other institutions or with our neighbors? Some of these changes would require major shifts, but others might be implemented more easily.
Reflections on Art and Sustainability

by Victor Margolin

The term “sustainability” has taken on varied meanings in the twenty-five years since it first came into use. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development, headed by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, defined it as follows:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of ‘needs,’ in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.

This definition appeared in the Commission’s report Our Common Future, which was published fifteen years after the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm—the first in a series of international meetings on environmental concerns; fifteen years after the Club of Rome’s seminal study The Limits to Growth; five years before the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which resulted in the document Agenda 21: The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; and fifteen years before the last of the global United Nations environmental gatherings, Earth Summit 2002, which was held in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Because sustainability initially arose within the framework of international politics, it is a more pragmatic approach to overcoming social injustice and environmental ills than the idealistic ecological theories that include deep ecology, which stems from the writings of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess; spiritual ecology, which puts a particular emphasis on the capacity to experience oneness with the planet; James Lovelock’s Gaia movement; and social ecology, which emphasizes social organization and collaboration with nature.

My own definition of sustainability follows in principle the statement in Our Common Future that “the strategy for sustainable development aims to promote harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature.” However, I choose to put the Brundtland Commission’s connection between the social and the environmental into a sharper political focus by substituting the term “social justice” for “harmony among human beings” and “environmental justice” for harmony “between humanity and nature.” Sustainability and the methods of achieving it are inherently political and, thus, contestable. Therefore, its definition should emphasize the need for struggle to achieve sustainable goals.

The culture deficit

In the various meetings and declarations on sustainability mentioned above, discussions of culture were nonexistent. The closest the United Nations came to the subject was the 1995 report Our Creative Diversity, which sums up the deliberations of UNESCO’s World Commission on Culture and Development. The commission took up problems of culture within the broad context of economic and social development and consequently had little to say about specific cultural activities such as literature, music, or art.
I was heartened to find the cultural question addressed in a recent essay by Hildegard Kurt, “Aesthetics of Sustainability,” which appeared in a volume initiated by the German artist Herman Prigann. Kurt argues that questions about the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of sustainability have lagged behind the debates on the topic that originated in the natural and social sciences during the mid 1980s. Though she does not refer directly to themes of human injustice such as torture, disease, and poverty with which artists have long been engaged, she does criticize the art world’s limited view of sustainability: “In the art world,” she writes, “lively dialogue is often hindered by the error of seeing sustainability only as an ‘environmental subject’ and not as a genuinely cultural challenge.”

Kurt also highlights the lack of cultural considerations in the sustainability discourse. “Anyone trying to find out why sustainability is not attractive as the task of the century,” she writes, “will come across the ‘culture deficit’ inherent in the conception of the model. In fact you will largely look in vain for artists as protagonists of sustainable future development in the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21. And culture as an element in society, going beyond the arts and humanist education to include symbolic and aesthetic creative practice by individuals and societies, is scarcely mentioned either.”

Given that discussions of culture, and especially art, are missing from the ecology and sustainability discourses of large international organizations and populist ecological movements alike, how does one begin to think about art’s relation to sustainability such that a new understanding of artistic practice might result?

**Sustainable art and its precedents**

Before continuing to speculate on this topic, I would like to briefly review some of the art movements and projects that one might consider as sustainable art or precedents for it. The projects fall into several categories: art that engages with the land or landscape; art that incorporates sustainable practices such as recycling; and art that responds to social issues through the production of objects or discourse. Within the first category, artists have engaged with the land in different ways, not all of which can be seen as environmentally sustainable. Various terms such as “environmental art,” “earthen art,” “land art,” and “eco-art,” have characterized these interventions. Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field (1977), Michael Heizer’s Double Negative (1969), Dennis Oppenheim’s Time Pocket (1968), and Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty (1970) [FIGURE 1] represent artists’ intentions to alter the landscape, either by making cuts, gashes, or holes in its surface, forming new shapes from large masses of earth, stone, or other materials, or, as with De Maria’s Lightning Field, filling a large field with metal rods lined up in symmetrical rows. Other artists produce sculpted or constructed forms that they place in the landscape to enter a dialogue with it. These include Mary Miss’s Sunken Pool (1974) and Alice Aycock’s Circular Building with Narrow Ledge for Walking (1976), the latter a structure that invites participation from the public. A third group of artists work with processes found in nature. Their projects are exemplified by Hans Haacke’s Ten Turtles Set Free (1970) and Newton Harrison’s Slow Growth and Death of a Lily Cell (1968).

Related projects include Alan Sonfist’s Time Landscape (1965–1978–ongoing) and Joseph Beuys’s 7000 Oaks (1982–1987) [FIGURE 3]. Sonfist obtained the use of a land parcel on LaGuardia Place in New York City, where he planted trees and shrubbery that would have grown in the precolonial city of Kassel, Germany, involved reforesting the city of Kassel. One of the largest environmental art works ever executed, it was finally completed in 1987 after he died.

In recent years, art in the landscape has taken on a different meaning when it has been used to reclaim sites that were previously abandoned or even subject to some destructive force. To create Wheatfield—A Confrontation (1982), Agnes Denes planted and harvested two acres of wheat on the Battery Park landfill close to Manhattan. As a discursive act, the project demonstrated how a piece of wasteland could be brought back to life, although it ended without transforming the landfill permanently. In Germany, Herman Prigann, who created the Terra Nova project (1996–2000) to reclaim damaged or destroyed landscapes, turned Rheinelbe, a former coal mine area near Gelsenkirchen that had become a garbage dump, into an archeological field replete with traces of former buildings, stone sculptures, and a major landmark called the Skystair.

Recycling is another activity that contributes to a sustainable environment. Since the 1920s, making art out of previously used materials has been one of the significant strands of modernism, although until recent years it has not been framed by a discourse of ecology or sustainability. While Kurt Schwitter made hundreds of collages from the printed flotsam and jetsam of Weimar Germany, critics have never considered him to be an ecological artist. The same is true for John Chamberlain, who reclaimed cast-off auto bodies, which he crushed and shaped into large metal sculptures. On the vernacular side, the “muffler men” made by folk artists in the American Southwest or the toy cars, trucks, and motorcycles created by street artists in Tanzania and other African countries are also examples of industrial waste that is turned to productive use. Mierle Ukeles, who has served for almost thirty years as 

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**REFLECTIONS ON ART AND SUSTAINABILITY**

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**FIG. 1**

Robert Smithson

*Lightning Field*, April 1977

Great Salt Lake, Utah

Black rock, salt crystals, earth, and red water (algae)

3 x 15 x 1500 feet

Art © Estate of Robert Smithson / licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

**FIG. 2**

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

*Media Flow City from Flow City, soft-potent Design for public art/video environment at 59th St. Marine Transfer Station, New York City Department of Sanitation

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**VICTOR MARQUEZ**

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**FIG. 3**

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

*Media Flow City from Flow City, soft-potent Design for public art/video environment at 59th St. Marine Transfer Station, New York City Department of Sanitation**
or artists, and by what criteria do we evaluate their work? In the never-ending debates on the difference between art and design, the distinction usually comes down to the primacy of discourse in artistic work and the relatively small role for design. Yet what is the significance of this distinction? How can we respond, and why is the artists’ work given special status in a museum or gallery if its aims are predominantly practical?

Problems of interpretation
The widening of artistic possibilities in the last century has had positive results for the future of art and particularly for art that engages with issues of sustainability. Besides the production of objects, two new elements have been added to artistic practice: participation and action. But these new possibilities have also created problems of interpretation that must be addressed before we can discuss further art’s contribution to a sustainable culture.

Earth artists and environmental artists created projects that drew the spectator in as a participant. The experience of environmental art was immediate and more visceral than viewing a picture on a gallery wall. Environmental art expanded the sites of artistic display beyond the gallery or museum, and even the urban spaces of public sculpture. In Beuys’s 7000 Oaks, for instance, people were also invited to participate in planting the trees, not only to walk among them.

Beuys’s project, like a number of others, spills over into the realm of action and raises questions about how to determine its aesthetic value. How do we determine the significance of similar projects by artists in the United States and Europe? Consider Harriet Feigenbaum’s land reclamation work, Erosion and Sedimentation Control Plan for Red Ash and Coal Silt Area—Willow Rings (1985). On a site damaged by strip mining, the artist planted two concentric circles of willow trees around a pond that was formed from coal-ash run-off. The site became a public park that also preserved the memory of the land’s prior use. Similarly, Bonnie Sherk founded The Farm in 1974, bringing together an interdisciplinary team to create a sustainable ecosystem and educational park on a piece of unused land near a

Art and sustainability
Three issues are central to the discussion of art and sustainability. The first regards form. If there is an “aesthetics of sustainability” (Kurt’s term), then it should be based on something that art provides as a basis for aesthetic judgment. This need not be a physical object, or even an immaterial project. It might be a gesture or even a mental action. What forms, then, does art take in a culture of sustainability? Are they vastly different from the forms of art in mainstream visual culture, or are they sufficiently analogous to be easily understood in a new context?

Kurt’s view of art in a modernist context leads her to characterize it as “a form of knowledge.” This definition enables art to bring “aesthetic competence into the cognitive process—which makes it different from science and at the same time its equal.” It is not clear what antecedents in modernism’s past Kurt is referring to when she characterizes art as knowledge, but one might imagine conceptual art, the Situationists, and some Fluxus activities as examples. Kurt believes that characterizing art as a form of knowledge can empower it discursively.

Once art is recognized as a cognitive medium, integrating aesthetic creative knowledge into the sustainability discourse would have a retrospective effect on that discourse, would change it. Art as a mode means that sustainability is seen, felt, thought, and conceived differently—and communicated differently. Though Kurt’s emphasis on art as a bearer of cognition brings it into relation with a discourse on sustainability, it does not clarify sufficiently what the boundaries of this discourse are, nor does it explain the contribution that art might make to it.

Adopting the broad definition of form that Kurt and others have provided leads to a second issue: art’s relation to other practices that are concerned with sustainability. After recognizing art as a cognitive medium, how do we then distinguish its particular characteristics from those of architecture, landscape design, graphic design, community action, and additional activities that engage with problems of sustainability, especially when the projects appear to be similar?

A third issue is related to the second. How do we think about art that moves from discourse to action, art whose intent is to produce a useful result? And what about artists who generate ideas and plans rather than objects or actions? Are they planners of similar projects by artists in the United States and Europe. Consider Harriet Feigenbaum’s land reclamation work, Erosion and Sedimentation Control Plan for Red Ash and Coal Silt Area—Willow Rings (1985). On a site damaged by strip mining, the artist planted two concentric circles of willow trees around a pond that was formed from coal-ash run-off. The site became a public park that also preserved the memory of the land’s prior use. Similarly, Bonnie Sherk founded The Farm in 1974, bringing together an interdisciplinary team to create a sustainable ecosystem and educational park on a piece of unused land near a
exhibition, thus preserving the conventional distinction between the practical and the discursive arts. What MoMA's departmental division fails to acknowledge, however, is that the discursive has spilled over into the practical and the practical has become more discursive. The landscape projects have as much to do with art discourse as artists’ action projects do with design. The prevailing division between art and design practice is one of the biggest obstacles to holistically envisioning a new sustainable culture and remains a challenge not only for museums, but also for artists and practitioners.

Let us return for a moment to Hildegard Kurt’s intention to discover an “aesthetics of sustainability” and her claim that in order for art to function as a cognitive medium, it must be “seen, felt, thought and conceived differently.” Although we recognize that culture consists of multiple discursive modes that complement each other’s ability to describe, explain, or even represent experience, defining the boundaries of those modes has become increasingly difficult. By separating art too rigidly from complementary practices that engage the same issues and situations, one runs the risk of maintaining a misleading cultural hierarchy in which art projects are understood to carry a heavier discursive load than more pragmatic designs. Thinking this way, however, often minimizes the discursive power in a practical design project.

Artists who call attention to social or environmental problems sometimes garner more notice and public interest than the people who are engaged directly with such problems. For a recent exhibition of his work at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art, artist Dan Peterman was invited to build three shed structures—a bicycle repair shop, a marketplace/classroom kiosk, and a garden shed—using standard waste containers. Two were relocated to a local park during the exhibition and adapted for a variety of cultural uses. However, the kiosks received more public attention and occupied more discursive space as art than as design. Had such kiosks been placed in the park directly, they might have merited a mention in the newspaper but not gained the cultural capital they accrued as works of art. By presenting his kiosks in an art exhibition, Peterman performed a service in that he called the need for such structures to public attention, and one could well argue that he used the cultural capital of art’s discursive power to call attention to a social need.

Nonetheless, the hierarchy between art, architecture, design, and planning remains a paradox within the culture of sustainability, where the principal criterion of value is to bring into being sustainable cultural products. As formal distinctions break down, we need to open up the discourse about projects to create greater continuity between them.

What gets lost when a cultural hierarchy of practices prevails is the wider knowledge of projects that do not fit easily into an art-world or museum framework. I think here of the many productive ideas...
A strategy for a sustainable future

Beuys was instrumental in creating the current difficulties that surround the problem of “ecological aesthetics.” He was strategically brilliant in trading on his recognition as a gallery artist to gain attention for his action projects such as 7000 Oaks and the polemics of his lecture tours. Ultimately all these activities have been drawn into an art discourse, but they don’t fit comfortably. To deal with new forms of human expression and action, critics and curators are continually trying to stuff them into institutional boxes where they don’t fit. Old categories need to collapse before we can begin to create a different dialogue on aesthetics in a sustainable culture.

We will need a new aesthetic to embrace the three categories of object, participation, and action without privileging the conventional formal characteristics of objects. In this aesthetic, the distinctions between art, design, and architecture will blur as critics discover new relations between the value of form and the value of use. Hildegard Kurt was correct when she criticized the art world for viewing sustainability in terms of environmental subjects instead of as a larger cultural challenge. The culture that Kurt identified within the wider sustainability discourse remains an issue and needs to be overcome. This will lead to new forms of solidarity within the culture of sustainability.

Imagination is an artist’s greatest asset. It can produce bold visions of what a sustainable future might be like. People can be moved and aroused by powerful environments, innovative designs, and practical demonstrations of active engagement. With open minds and a willingness to collaborate, those who seek a place in the culture of sustainability must move forward. The problem of “ecological aesthetics” will solve itself.
ALLORA & CALZADILLA

Opposite: Under Discussion, 2004–05 (detail), Single channel video projection with sound (CAT. 2)
Several recent projects by Allora & Calzadilla (Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla) have brought a poetic sensibility to bear on the complex intersections of power, activism, and environmentalism within the landscape of Vieques, a small island off the coast of Puerto Rico. Vieques has been—and remains—disputed terrain. After decades of effort by local and international activists, the US military stopped conducting its notorious bombing exercises on Vieques in 2003. The land is now managed by the US Department of the Interior, a shift that raises a new set of challenges for Viequenses who wish to preserve space for themselves in the face of plans for tourist developments and intensive environmental preservation.

Allora & Calzadilla are represented in Beyond Green by two recent projects that address sustainability in Vieques. Each of these videos follows a young man traveling around the island on a modified vehicle: an everyday object that the artists have transformed for evocative new uses. In each case, Allora & Calzadilla intercut close-ups of the rider and vehicle with wide or aerial shots that situate these unusual journeys within the contested landscape of Vieques, in which verdant open spaces, homes, military installations, and protest graffiti comingle.

In Returning a Sound (2004–05), Homar, an activist, rides around Vieques on a moped that Allora & Calzadilla reengineered by attaching a trumpet to the exhaust system. During the ride, every thrust of the throttle or shift in speed alters the instrument’s pitch. Allora & Calzadilla have edited out other ambient noise, leaving only the alternately sputtering vibrato and clear, pure sound of the trumpet as a jazzlike soundtrack, a call to action, or perhaps an anthem, as the artists discuss in the interview that follows.

Under Discussion (2005) features a special boat, a simple wooden table that Allora & Calzadilla flipped upside-down and enhanced with a motor. The video’s protagonist, Diego, circumnavigates the island on this craft, a witness to Vieques’s uncertain situation as well as an actor in determining its future as he moves the discussion into surreal waters. The table has become a vehicle—a means to get somewhere—and also a stand-in for other tables around which those seeking to resolve Vieques’s future have gathered. As Yates McKee has noted, however, such tables are imperfect vehicles. “In liberal thought, ‘sitting down at the table’ suggests an ideal space of conflict-resolution through rational dialogue […] Yet this ideal falls to account for the inequalities that underwrite the space of the table to begin with, such as the hierarchical division between scientific expertise and local ecological knowledge, which rarely register at all in planning processes. Under Discussion is an experimental device for publicizing such counter-knowledge.”

Interview

Stephanie Smith: You will be showing two short videos in Beyond Green, both of which deal with Vieques, a small island off the coast of Puerto Rico. That particular location and its shifting environmental, social, and political conditions is crucial to your project. Could you talk about the background?

Allora & Calzadilla: Vieques is an island off the mainland of Puerto Rico used for the past 60 years by the US Military and NATO forces to practice military bombing exercises. The civil disobedience movement on the island, along with the active protest movement and various civic initiatives by Viequenses and an international network of support, led in May of 2002 to the stopping of the bombing, the removal of the US military forces from the island, and the beginning of the process of demilitarization, decontamination, and future development. When the civil disobedience movement succeeded in removing the US military from the island in 2003, the land changed ownership from US military property to the ownership and management by the US Department of Interior, Fish, and Wildlife Services. This shift in management has created a stalemate for the civic initiatives on the island, who are demanding that their land be decontaminated of all toxic substances and unexploded ordinance and ultimately be restored to municipal jurisdiction and management.

SS: Please describe the two video works that will be in the exhibition, starting with the earlier piece, Returning a Sound.

A&C: Returning a Sound was made after the military lands were finally opened to the public in May 2003. We were thinking about how this celebratory moment, in which the civic movement enjoyed a momentous victory, was also quite a precarious time, as the ultimate fate of the land was still uncertain. We became interested in the idea of an anthem as a commemorative structure, but we were not satisfied with the conservative connotations of the word, its uses and abuses. We preferred the more open set of associations that the Greek etymology of the word offered: antiphonos, sounding in answer, and anti- in return. We wanted to create a gesture that would at once proclaim loudly the achievement of the civic initiatives yet would call to attention the new stakes of the movement.

Our video, Returning a Sound, follows the path of Homar, a civil disobedient, moving throughout the island on his moped. The muffler of his bike has been altered from an apparatus used to silence the noise produced by the motor to an instrument, a trumpet, used to produce a loud resonating call, a call to attention and to action, as the island now is entering a transitional period between destruction and recovery and a new era of imagining its future development.

SS: What about Under Discussion?

A&C: The present state of the land in Vieques is under discussion. Facing challenges in many ways far greater and complex than the demilitarization campaigns, the citizens of Vieques are currently entrenched in a mire of bureaucratic, administrative, legal, and political debates concerning the fate of their island. This film follows the son of a local fisherman involved in the Fisherman’s Movement, a key movement in the 1970s that initiated the civil disobedience movement on the island. He has converted the discussion table, by turning it upside down, into a boat, and is driving it along the coastal areas of the island where the land status is still contested. Mobilizing the discussion table
SS: The central figure in each video makes a perambulation around the island: either by land or by sea he ends up right back where he started. That seems a bit pessimistic: it suggests a condition of stasis to the trumpet’s call for action although perhaps is more in keeping with the protagonists’ roles as witnesses/observers.

A&C: We see this cyclical movement a bit differently. The idea for the protagonists’ particular trajectory was for it to function as a kind of mapping. In Returning a Sound, Homar travels through those tracts of land that in his lifetime and in the generation before him had never been considered property. In Under Discussion, Diego starts in the central southern town of Esperanza and moves eastward along the fishing routes that were the contested land that in his lifetime and in the generation before him had never been accessible. In the extraprotests of the 1940s, thousands of families living throughout the island were forced off of their land and made to either leave together or to settle in a small wedge of land in the island’s center. The military occupation of the island divided the geography into three sections. In the west was the ammunition storage facility and in the east was the life-firing range. In Between was the civilian population. So in Returning a Sound, Homar begins his journey in the civilian area in the central northern town of Isabel II and then moves in a clockwise direction around the entire island. With his modified bike, he starts in the town and then moves into the military lands. A similar logic holds true for Under Discussion. In this instance, Diego starts in the central southern town of Esperanza and moves eastward along the fishing routes that were the contested grounds of the Fisherman’s Movement, which initially bore witness to the devastating effects of the bombing. Since both of their actions took place within a certain temporality, we understand that the protagonists do not really arrive exactly where they started. Time has passed—both the protagonist and his environment in which his action took place are somehow, even if only slightly, different. It is more of a spiral than a circular movement. This understanding of time and transformation, in a certain manner, reflects the ecological nature of the peace and justice

SS: Under Discussion was just included in the Venice Biennale. Was it your choice to show the piece? If so, why did you select it for that context?

A&C: Yes, we chose to show the work for a number of reasons, starting first with the site of the Biennale in the Italian Naval Arsenale. Shown in that context, the video opens up to crosscultural and transhistorical references, as the subject of militarism, conquest, and empire have played a central role throughout civilizations and histories. The video considers what happens to former military land. Showing it in the context of a large-scale international art exhibition housed in a former navy property confronts the viewer with one possible outcome, a site for cultural production, while hopefully critically opening that space up to its own form of interrogation, perhaps leading the viewer to question, among other things, the role culture plays in such transitional spaces, what it permits and what it excludes. Another, more pragmatic interest of ours was to expose the situation in Vieques to a large international public. With no interest in instrumentalization, we hope this work expands the network of solidarity and support for the people of Vieques and the global demilitarization movement in general. One of the reasons for the success of the peace and justice campaign in Vieques was its ability to reach out to a global network of supporters who have both contributed to and learned from the initiatives in Vieques. So for example, you find people in a village in South Korea who call their town “The Vieques of Korea” and are using tactics similar to those that were used in Vieques in their own resistance to bombing exercises in Masahyang-ri. Or a conference organized in Glasgow, Scotland, entitled “Lessons from Vieques—a Conference Celebrating Peace, Resistance and a Commitment to a Military-free Scotland” (April 2005). There were also 9,000 protesters marching in Friedrotz, Germany, on March 27th, 2005, for the struggle in Vieques. Our intention in showing Under Discussion in Venice was to establish yet another link in this larger global network of solidarity and support.

SS: As I’ve watched Under Discussion, I can’t discern whether the table/boat is actually on the water or if it’s a very clever digital manipulation. That ambiguity seems interesting—maybe a reflection of the instability and murkiness of the whole situation on Vieques—but at the risk of killing the mystery I’m going to ask anyway. Did the table actually work as a boat?

A&C: Yes.

SS: Do the objects—the table/boat and the altered moped—still exist? Do you have any interest in them as sculpture or design apart from their use within these videos?

A&C: Both the table/boat and the altered moped are still in Vieques. The last time we checked, the table/boat was still in the harbor in Esperanza, the small town on the south side of the island. It was being used as a dinghy by the fisherman to go out to their larger fishing boats in the harbor. Homar still has the moped and uses it to get around the island, but the last we heard the trumpet fell off, so it’s back to being a regular muffler.

SS: As a technical note, are there any particular display parameters for your video works? Do you think about them as installations? Do they need to be screened as projections, at a particular scale?

A&C: We prefer for these two particular videos to be projected. It underscores the monumentality and weight of the situation the protagonists find themselves in, even if their activities are repetitive or mundane—i.e. driving a moped or a boat—and it foregrounds the land as the arena in which these antagonisms are staged.
for the fluorescent light sculpture by Dan Flavin, Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake) (1965). Enough sunlight was collected from Puerto Rico to power the Dan Flavin sculpture for the course of an exhibition.

Ten Minute Transmission consists of an antenna made from hundreds of metal wire hangers, forming a replica of the International Space Station (ISS). This precarious/fragile construction is suspended above the exhibition location, the sculpture/antenna attempts to make two-way contact with the astronauts. This is done through the use of a ham radio and a computer program that automatically dials the ISS every 90 minutes, the amount of time it takes the space station to orbit the earth. In the time between attempting contact, the antenna functions as an international radio station capturing other ham, fm, and am radio signals coming through the air (locally and internationally) that are made audible to the passing public.

However, our interest in this work is not reducible to sheerly technical or functional criteria. It is comprised of an unnatural composite of elements—political, technological, and sculptural—that would normally never be brought together. We wanted to evoke Vladimir Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International (1919, designed to have a gigantic radio tower) but also to draw attention to the exclusionary conception of “the international” that surrounded another engineering project with universal pretensions, the ISS, a paramilitary complex floating outside the earth. Despite its name, the ISS is controlled by a handful of powerful nations in the global north; this poses a big political question about who gets to be represented in the extraterrestrial realm. On its own, this dialectic would make an interesting historical and political point, but it would not be monstrous. Coat hangers are a debased, cast-off material, part of an economy of the scavenger. They are distribut with an infinite capacity to be reused for purposes other than those prescribed by their original design. They are ciphers of the potential monstrosity that haunts the utopian plans of “mankind.”

SS: How do you see these works fitting into the questions about sustainable design raised by Beyond Green?

A&C: Our works included in this exhibition in particular look at the question of environmental justice—what and who counts as an endangered species—and how this discourse reconceptualizes the relationships between nonhuman and human nature and, as a result, complicates and broadens mainstream notions of environmentalism. The land-rights struggle in Vieques extends the parameters of the term sustainability to include the very survival of the indigenous civilian population of the island, and, as a result, complicates and broadens mainstream notions of environmentalism and sustainability to include questions of social justice that affect how people live in their environments. The recent transition of the contaminated naval grounds into a wildlife refuge administered by the US Department of the Interior and the rapid development of mostly North American tourist initiatives further complicate this debate. The former mask grave health problems caused by the release of toxic chemicals from the hundreds of thousands of bombs dropped over the past 60 years on this small island and the latter continues a long history of colonization and systematic exclusion of the local population from the natural and productive resources of the island.

June 2005

Ten Minute Transmission, 1998–03 (detail)
Metal wire hangers and ham radio
Installation view at Tate Modern, London

Puerto Rican Light, 2003
Ten Minute Transmission, 1998–03 (detail)
FREE SOIL
Free Soil, formed in 2004, is a collaborative group of artists, activists, researchers, and gardeners with a shared interest in “projects that reveal social, political, cultural, and environmental relationships.” They are particularly interested in the interrelationships among cities and other ecologies, the environmental impact of urban development, and progressive uses of urban space. (The team working on Beyond Green includes new media artist Amy Franceschini, founder of the artists’ group Futurefarmers; artist and interaction designer Myriel Milicevic; and artist and radical gardener Nis Ramer.) Free Soil brings the interdisciplinary skills of its members to bear on multimedia projects that include sculpture, gallery installations, public projects, gardens, workshops, and Web-based new media technologies. Free Soil’s projects combine a friendly, even playful design sensibility with activist pedagogy; they believe “art can be a catalyst for social awareness and change.”

F.R.U.I.T. (Fruit Route User InTerface, but an open acronym), Free Soil’s new project for Beyond Green, explores the networks that link cities and agricultural areas and highlights the costs (social, economic, environmental) of getting fruit from rural farms to ever-growing urban populations. Franceschini, Milicevic, and Ramer have conducted research to trace the paths that fruit takes as it travels from farms to urban fruit stands. Focusing on the orange—a fruit they chose for its sturdiness and the ease with which it can be shared among a group of people— they have compiled stories and statistics that reveal the environmental and social impact of its journey to market. With its tagline “The Right to Know!”, F.R.U.I.T. encourages people to learn about where their food comes from and to support local agriculture.

The project combines an ongoing public art initiative with an installation that makes the public component tangible within the gallery space. The installation centers on Free Soil’s re-creation of a fruit stand: a bit of vernacular design that one might find in any urban street market, laden here with fake oranges rather than actual produce. The “oranges” are wrapped with printed sheets that combine playful graphics with concrete information about Free Soil’s “The Right to Know!” campaign. Visitors are invited to take one wrapper from a dispenser included in the installation. The wrappers (also available in digital form on Free Soil’s Web site) can be used to wrap fruit in one’s own local grocery or fruit stand and leave it for others; this gentle intervention makes use of existing networks to spread information and raise awareness. The gallery presentation also includes prints that convey Free Soil’s ideas and an interactive computer station that links to the interactive F.R.U.I.T. Web site. These components of F.R.U.I.T. unpack the elaborate processes that undergird an everyday act of consumption. Like all of Free Soil’s projects, F.R.U.I.T. is a conduit for learning, and through it they hope to raise awareness about urban gardening and other alternative food movements as instruments for change.

Other meanings for F.R.U.I.T.
Fruit Route Under Intense Transit
Finding Routes Using Itinerate Technologies
Following Routes Using Itinerate Technologies
Following Routes Using Internet Technologies
Fostering Rural Urban Itinerate Technicians
Fossils of Rural Urban Illusionist Transportation
Fiction Revealed Using Instruments of Truth
Fruit Route Use Intertwine Transit
Fruit Reveals Unintentional Interventionist Truth
Fruit Reveals Unadorned Instant Truths
Fruit Reveals Unexpected Instant Truths

F.R.U.I.T., 2005
Interactive installation with wood, cloth awning, wood boxes, styrofoam, paper wrappers, computer equipment, and three Iris prints
Installation view at Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago
(CAT. 3)
Interview

Stephanie Smith: You’ve only been working together as Free Soil for a year. Please tell me a bit about each of your backgrounds, why you decided to form this new artists’ group, and what you each bring to the collaboration.

Free Soil: Free Soil sprouted during a workshop in Lofoten, Norway, which focused on media in relation to site. Four of us (Amy Franceschini, Nis Rømer, Stijn Scffeels, and Joni Taylor) came together during this workshop and found that even though we were working in geographically distant places, we shared references and were all interested in the environment and in participatory art forms. We found there that we all had aligned interests in the economic, social, and political organization of space. We wanted to make a milieu for exchange and learning together, so to facilitate this for ourselves we made the Web site www.free-soil.org, which is also a public resource. We formed this umbrella group with a hope that we would continue the discussion we had started in Norway. Our interests really stem from wanting to learn and propose alternative methods of research, collaboration, and learning.

Free Soil has grown to include other members. Three of us are working on the project for Beyond Green: Amy Franceschini is an artist and educator dealing with notions of community, sustainable environments, and a perceived conflict between humans and nature. She founded Futurefarmers in 1995 and continues to maintain a balance between art and design. Currently she is teaching art at Stanford University and San Francisco Art Institute. Myriam Milicic is from Germany and has just completed a master’s degree in Interaction Design, a new field that concentrates on human involvement when designing for telecommunication technologies, interactive products, and services. She has combined mobile game playing with sensing technologies so that everyday people can explore their environments in a fun and informative way. Nis Rømer comes from Denmark and works with public art in the city, on the Web, and in the news media. He studied urban planning at The Berlage Institute (Netherlands) and has a special interest in the social and political organization of space and in how processes of globalization affect the city and our natural environment.

SS: What do you each find most interesting or satisfying about working as part of this collective?

Nis Rømer: Apart from being able to share resources, being a part of a community allows you to test your ideas, which is useful when working in the social sphere. Amy Franceschini: I like to think of Free Soil as a mother ship: a free-floating and open-source system of activities and resources that lands on occasion. We all have an interest in sharing our resources and collectively questioning the social and political landscape that surrounds us. At this point, we try to stay as open as possible. Myriam Milicic: Looking simultaneously at the same issues from remote places is quite interesting—we can compare patterns and behaviors between different locations, and often their conditions are linked to one another.

SS: You live in three different countries and only occasionally get to work together face-to-face—that’s one of the reasons we’re doing this interview by email. I’m curious about how that shapes the dynamics of your creative process.

FS: Since Norway, we have collectively met in person twice. Once Nis hosted us in Copenhagen, and another time Amy hosted in San Francisco. We have found that when
three out of the four persons are away from their home and everyday distractions, we can really focus on projects at hand. It also gives a chance for the host to see his or her city with new eyes. Since we met on neutral ground (in Norway), we have tossed the idea around that maybe we should meet like this more often—experiencing a new place together—like a condensed workshop situation. When we are not together, aligning time zones can be tricky, but we all try to work around this and so far it has not been prohibitive.

SS: Do you tend to take responsibility for different parts of a project? Do you take turns with one person as the point person for each project? (I’ve been in most direct contact with Amy on this project so far, and I’m curious whether that’s your preferred mode of working.)

FS: Depending on the origin of the project, different people become the contact. For instance, Nis received a grant from the Danish Art Foundation to bring Free Soil members Stijn, Jari, and Amy to Copenhagen for a week in 2004 to produce the Free Soil website and write proposals for other shows and festivals. In this case Nis was the contact. For Beyond Green Amy has been the contact person, mostly due to location and language. Ideally we try to work as a distributed brain, but this is not always the case.

SS: Are there other artists or thinkers who have been particularly influential for you, individually or collectively?

AF: A ceramics teacher, Joe Hawley, in undergraduate studies told me, “Art is a verb!” I have always held this close to my heart. Paolo Soleri and Miguel de Cervantes’s Quixote share the same umbrella in terms of perseverance and fantasy. Recently I have been charmed by Tim Hunkin’s Secret Life of Machines series. Others: Hans Haacke, Jacob Moreno, Rudolph Steiner, Stephen Willats.

NR: People working close to me have always been very important, from a distance a few would be: curator Mary Jane Jacob, artists Group Material, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Oyvind Fahlström, and Bas Jan Ader, and the film Safe by Todd Haynes.

MM: Flatland by Edwin Abbott keeps reminding me that we can always zoom out into dimensions we didn’t imagine possible and can have tremendous fun with that. Shigeru Miyamoto for creating these crumbling worlds that people enjoy exploring. My childhood hero Heinz Sielmann, an old German fossil who made animal documentaries. Also the Interaction Design Institute Ivrea: in the last couple of years people decided to move from all over the world to a little town in the north of Italy, carrying along with them all kinds of personal skills and histories, all of them ready to experiment with this amorphous field “Interaction Design” in their own and joint ways.

SS: How do you see your work fitting into the current state of global art practice?

AF/NR: Maybe we can rephrase the question to ask why we choose to work under the umbrella of art rather than activism. We all agree that art remains more open than activism. We have found that much activism is bound by prescribed thoughts, dogma, and manifestoes. Art does not have to have one aim and that helps us avoid clichéd activist positions. This openness possibly allows for more mobility without constraints of “right” and “wrong.” We share a common, growing concern about a world that is on the verge of an environmental, military, and economic crisis. We are compelled to engage with this reality.

MM: Recently we have observed that an interest in environmental awareness and sustainability has gained relevance not only in many art projects but also within business strategies, technology industries, and politics. This development is as exciting as it is curious. At the same time, I feel there is a danger in words like “sustainable” becoming popular buzzwords—they inevitably will lose their meaning as people grow tired of them. Artists’ intentions may be suspected when they address such topics. It will be an interesting challenge to keep people on their toes.

SS: As I write, you’re finalizing F.R.U.I.T., your project for Beyond Green. Please tell me about your current plans for this project.

AF/NR: Embedded in the food we consume are nutrients along with a cornucopia of information: historical and current political, cultural, and environmental data. When you purchase an orange from a local grocer for 50, you are purchasing more than what can fit in your hand. Free Soil has been interested in following oranges from shelf back to the farm. In this journey oranges pass through many hands before they reach the shelves. We chose to follow oranges because they are available year-round in all of the three cities where we reside. The physical properties of the orange were also of interest, in that it truly is the most communal fruit—oranges are very easy to share among a group. We aim to unearth information about the distribution of food into urban spaces and its effect on CO2 emissions, economics, social relations, and the like. For Beyond Green, we will build a fruit stand that will serve as an information center. Instead of shopping for the fruit, people can “shop” for the information that is part of the fruit: the “fruit memory.” We will produce a set of fruit wrappers printed with information, along with an interactive website.
FREE SOIL

F.R.U.I.T., 2005 (detail)
Digital graphic of wrapper front (left) and back (right) (CAT 3)
NR: The Brundtland Report from 1987 was an important influence early on; this report tied sustainability to environmental protection, economic growth, and social equity. For me, making art that engaged in the environment resounded well with critiques of art institutions for not dealing with social and political issues.

SS: What do you see as the biggest challenges to developing and maintaining a sustainable art practice?

AF: I am not sure making “sustainable art” was initially a conscious effort. It has more to do with a way of life or a way of thinking that we have developed over time. It is about heightening and complicating our awareness of how we live in, relate to, and interact with our surroundings.

SS: Could you talk about your design sensibility? It’s sleek in some ways, but there’s a real friendliness to the graphic style, and a do-it-yourself aesthetic to the objects and installations.

FS: We have a common interest in user-friendliness and accessibility. The design is not made to build a hierarchy, but to create a level playing field. Creating a visual language in our projects is essential. In a way, it is a sort of domestication of the museum.

To quote Renny Pritikin on the damselfish of the Galapagos: “Each damselfish knows every pebble and leaf in its little corner of the tide pool and will remove any object that disturbs the perfection of its microcosm. In the same way, the universe is perfect and they are responsible for keeping their little section consistent with the whole—i.e. are devout.”

June 2005

JAM
Jane Palmer and Marianne Fairbanks have been working together as JAM since 2000. JAM creates projects that offer poetic and practical ways of embedding sustainable habits within daily life; this approach extends to Palmer and Fairbanks’ work as artists, teachers, and citizens.

JAM has combined its members’ training in fiber arts with their interest in sustainable practices in a project that combines art, design, and a socially motivated form of entrepreneurship. They created a series of prototypes for garments and bags equipped with lightweight, flexible solar panels that power small-scale electric devices like cell phones. Through collaborations with technical and business experts, designers, and distributors, JAM plans to move beyond prototyping and to produce them on a larger scale while continuing to use sustainable production strategies such as hiring local labor and making the bags from sturdy and/or repurposed waste materials. As part of this push to get their technology into wider use, JAM is also developing kits that contain the electronics necessary to transform one’s own bags and are sharing their plans with designers.

JAM originally called the project personal power and then changed the name to Noon Solar, a shift that suggests the ways in which JAM’s creations can carry multiple identities as they move among different contexts. personal power grew out of Palmer and Fairbanks’ Iraq-heightened awareness of the political consequences of dependence on oil and other fossil fuels, but the pair decided that in the commercial arena it made sense to downplay a “crunchy” sensibility in favor of a more open-ended and contemporary-sounding name. This fits with the look of the objects. These fashionable bags allow users to step free of the electrical power grid while retaining the ability to hook into communication networks, be stylish, or simply enjoy a little music. The name Noon Solar thus provides a bit of camouflage for JAM’s utopian aims, and the hip or eco-conscious consumers who will be the bag’s first users will participate in a work of social sculpture whether or not they’re aware of or interested in JAM’s larger project of making personal solar technology desirable, affordable, and widely available.

To that end, JAM will continue to sell limited-edition prototypes of the bags and will show the project in exhibitions. Their new installation, Jump Off, presents a convivial grouping of the bags and includes an animation by Arthur Jones that highlights JAM’s concerns about the interconnections between energy consumption and military action.
Statement

We have been working together in Chicago for the past five years. We came together in grad school at a point when we were both looking to get beyond the boundaries of our studios. We wondered how we could make art that would be relevant and interesting beyond the classroom or studio when we were not meaningfully interacting with the realities of our locality, the communities around us, or the issues that were of concern to people beyond the art world. We began investigating ways of creating work that could reach a broader audience and be more accessible than most of the conceptual work we saw being produced. Once we decided to collaborate, it changed our entire approach to making art. We had to let go of the notion of sole authorship, which inspired us to seek out new interactions and gave us confidence to go out and meet people with whom we might join forces. Working together was essential in spurring us to start asking others for their help and to pursue more ambitious projects than we could achieve alone.

We’ve become more interested in cultivating interactive, participatory, and educational experiences. We search for ways to initiate and show work in new contexts and environments, places where the work might not necessarily be seen as “Art” but where the audience for the work far exceeds the number of people that might see a piece hanging in a gallery. As Suzanne Lacy writes in Mapping the Terrain, “these expansive venues allow not only for a broader reach but ultimately a more integrated role for the artist in society.”

Many of our projects have explored the notion of people-powered energy, which has led us over the past few years to the Noon Solar project. We started working on this project, initially titled Personal Power, around the time of the run-up to the current Iraq war. Feeling powerless in our country’s decision-making process, we started talking about ways to bring power back to the individual. Because the war felt so driven by our country’s greed for oil, we wondered if there was a way to use solar power on a scale that could enable each one of us to be independent from the electrical power grid.

After some initial investigation, we found a company that made flexible and lightweight solar panels. We realized that we could integrate these into garments and handbags to create mobile power units for handheld electronic devices such as cell phones. Our goal was to find a way to disconnect from conventional power sources and to still be connected to a larger network of information. With the help of local solar expert Vladimir Nekola, we created a few prototypes of different potential applications. It was our hope that by integrating solar power into items that people already used—like a handbag or backpack—they might become more interested in using solar power on a larger scale.

Realizing that this project could be useful in many areas of the world—particularly in countries where many communities not yet wired for electricity have access to cell phones—we decided to make it into a product, not just a conceptual project. We chose this route because we know that as a single piece of art or as a prototype it will have little or no effect on changing the current dependency on foreign and non-renewable energy sources, whereas it might have some more measurable effect as a more widely available consumer product. For the past year and a half, we have been working with business students, engineers, and pattern designers to try to make this a reality. One thing that sets us apart as a business is that we came up with this idea in order to distribute new power sources, not to make money. Admittedly, this is an odd way to approach a business in a money-driven society, but we look forward to committing our ethics and values of sustainable growth into our business.

In our own practice, we have adopted various values and concepts from decades of artists working within frameworks of public art, environmental art, community based art, feminist art, and activist art. This includes thinking about materials and where they come from; whom the work is for; how to be socially responsible; the distribution of materials and information; how to provide solutions; and how to expand our audience. We created a class for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago called “Sustainable Forms.” As teachers, we feel it is important to show students alternative options to the more traditional art structures of galleries and museums. We can encourage students to make their work accessible to a broad audience by being socially and locally relevant, politically engaged, and generous. We also promote the benefit of creating partnerships and exploring venues outside the traditional art system. We hope that these considerations can show students ways to sustain productive, meaningful practices over time. This independence provides freedom to think creatively and critically about their role as artists. We need to acknowledge that each year thousands of students are being trained as visual artists to eventually enter into a system that does not provide concrete jobs for them. Perhaps one day, jobs for artists will be abundant if their roles are expanded and integrated into a new social structure that places a higher value on their creative work. William McDonough and Michael Braungart describe the ideal sustainable society in their book Cradle to Cradle (2002). They write that “every creature is involved in maintaining the entire system; all of them work in creative and ultimately effective ways for the success of the whole.” This is the healthy social structure we strive for in our life, art practice, and pedagogy.

February 2005
LEARNING GROUP

Opposite: Collected Material Dwelling, Model 1:1, 2005 (detail)
Installation view at Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago (CAT. 3)
Brett Bloom, Julio Castro, Rikke Luther, and Cecilia Wendt have been working together since 2004. Through their collaborative art projects, they develop strategies for putting common materials to creative new uses that address problems within the built environment. These projects model inexpensive, concrete, and sometimes playful ways that people anywhere can employ renewable or waste materials to improve the quality of their lives. They devise methods to gather and use these materials, making drawings, models, posters, and sculptural structures to test their ideas and share their processes and designs with others. Each member has gained recognition for prior work with other artists’ groups. Bloom is one of the founders of the American artists’ group Temporary Services; Castro is cofounder of the Mexican group Tercerunquinto; and Luther and Wendt are cofounders of the Scandinavian group NS5.

During a residency in Japan in 2004, Learning Group developed a process, which they call a Collecting System, to gather waste paper and cardboard. They collaborated with students and community members to turn this material into several projects, including a 1:1 scale model of a domed cardboard dwelling called Learning by Sea Urchin, which has since been recycled. The project is represented in the exhibition through a Learning Poster and drawings.

In 2005, the group set up another Collecting System in squatted lands on the outskirts of Monterrey, Mexico. In collaboration with residents, and in response to the specific needs and resources of the site, Learning Group developed a system to turn discarded plastic bottles into building material. For this exhibition, they produced a 1:1 scale model made from cardboard and plastic bottles collected from the University of Chicago’s waste stream and other Chicago sources. The structure can be broken down into small components for easy assembly as the exhibition travels. A Learning Poster and several drawings show other parts of the process.

Learning Group has also proposed a project for growing mushrooms in cave-like spaces tunneled beneath houses. Given legal restrictions, such a project would have to be underground in both the literal and figurative senses: a subterranean network of urban agriculture. The unrealized project embodies Learning Group’s ideas about self-sufficiency and its belief in the need to make creative, productive use of overlooked spaces and resources. The proposal is part of their series of Connecting Systems and is represented in the exhibition by a small model, a Learning Poster, and drawings.
Interview

Stephanie Smith: You’ve only been working as Learning Group for a year. Why did you decide to work together, and what do you each bring to the group?

Rikke Luther: We each come from very different places, giving us different methods and possibilities to work so we can use our own backgrounds in new ways. We all have different histories and different languages. This is what we now are expanding through sharing and mixing.

Brett Bloom: Cecilia and Rikke were cofounders of the Copenhagen-based group N55, which I worked with on several occasions. When they were no longer with N55, Rikke wanted to continue working in a group so she contacted Cecilia, Julio, and me and started discussions with us separately. These discussions eventually led to the production of texts, ideas, and work together, as well as a process that continues to develop.

Cecilia Wendt: It started out of a long-term interest in how education becomes part of persons’ lives and produces knowledge and language.

SS: As Brett notes, you all have worked (and some of you continue to work) with other artists’ groups apart from Learning Group. What do you each find most interesting or satisfying about working collectively? How do you manage group process across distance?

BB: I am currently active with five groups, some more than others. I am constantly challenged by this way of working—a challenge that doesn’t come when I sit by myself in a studio making objects. Each group offers a different social ecosystem, personalities, capabilities, and challenges. Some groups work better than others and have all of their energy aligned. Others require a lot more effort to get them to work. Out of all of these groups, only one approaches “collectivity.” The rest are nowhere near that and require other descriptors. The group process is quite scattered and not very efficient yet with Learning Group, but it is still young and we are still discovering how to work with each other. We all live in different countries and this creates both a very interesting way of working and some obvious difficulties in keeping communication steady.

CW: The work we did with N55 was part of a situation just as this is part of a situation. From that perspective our attitude or interests have not changed, just our conditions.

BB: The sensibilities of Learning Group are informed by all our prior work and the special situation that is created by our working together. It will necessarily be different from N55, Temporary Services, or Tercerincuinceto. We really want our explorations to be both visually engaging and also have a real, even if tiny, impact on the local contexts within which they work. There is no such concern with how this work circulates in an art context. We all have played that game and don’t need to repeat it with this work. There is a great freedom in this aspect for me.

JC: In my case, after making a project in the outskirts of Monterrey (a city in northern Mexico) and seeing how people can be a part of the process and also its receivers, it was important to see how more symbolic the shape could be and how relevant it was to explore other dynamics outside of the institutional way of doing things. One can simultaneously rethink authorship, leading a project, and the directions in which one can speculate about how a work can be when released from the expectations conditioned by the institutionalism of the art world. It is relevant to see how ideas and preconceptions disappear when you let the work go on its own and let the context be a part of the process. You can then say that the work is “alive.” You can recover elements and bring them into the institution but must always think about the ethics of what you are connected to in the different worlds.

I really liked to see how Monterrey was expanding and how much of the expansion in this context created new strategies to manage its realities, for instance: the use of waste of others; the recovering of objects, clothes, materials for construction, which provides an economy linked to the city; copying standard methods of construction; use of space, seeing how the work is absorbed and modified by the context, and considering how this interpretation could be radically modified when the context changes.

SS: I’m glad you’ve decided on a name for the group—I know it’s something you’ve been thinking about for a while now. How did you come to the name Learning Group? I like its focus on process and the suggestion that not only is your work meant to be instructive for others but also that it allows you to continue to stretch and to learn, yourselves.

JC: I guess this is part of the job for Learning Group, or for any group or individual. I relate the name more to a sense of commitment and involvement, where one can decide how deeply to get into a project, to bring part of one’s knowledge and make it a component of a project.

CW: The collaboration in this case is not an end or form in itself. It has been an attempt to discuss learning as well. This started out with a kind of basic distribution system in order to talk about the activity in our projects in Japan and Mexico: the Learning Poster. We also use a Website where we gather material and thinking. It is called Learning Site, a notion we use for other situations as well.

SS: Are there specific aspects of your prior work that have informed this new endeavor? For instance, Rikke and Cecilia, the sustainable ethos and do-it-yourself sensibility of these new projects resonates with your former work with N55, but in terms of design the aesthetic is much warmer, friendlier.

RL: In relation to do-it-yourself it could be called “do-it-ourselves”—the work includes a direct dialogue with other persons in a more specific situation and at the Learning Site. The aesthetics are related to the specific situations we encounter.

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Flyers were distributed in the city of Moriya, Japan, informing about the collection of paper materials from homes and workplaces. The donated paper was either delivered to the school or picked up.

Cooking Glue: The rice has to be boiled in plenty of water for a whole day. The rice is poured through a sieve. Boro salts are added to the paper to prevent decay, mold, and pests.

Places producing Unused Material > Collecting System: Paper was collected from September to December in the city of Moriya, Japan.

Paper Brick: Constructed of rice glue and collected shredded paper.

Walking City was built from materials from the Collecting System in cooperation with 78 persons from Goshu Elementary School, Moriya, Japan.

The Collecting System is going to be established in a periphery zone of the city of Monterrey, Mexico, in 2005. This area has about 300 families living on squatted land. The economy of the place is based on self-employment and the collecting of unused materials from urban, industrial, and construction materials. It is used for building temporary dwellings. A way to have more sustainable housing, to migrate into the already existing and respecting plant planning of the city. This includes using unused architectural and legal dwellings. Concretes is used as a raw material, which is an important local industry.

The Collecting System gathers unused materials to be used in local daily life. Unused materials accumulated in the Collecting System are to be used for educational research, and other things.

Info about Collecting System in practice:
1) Unused materials produced by households are state property and controlled by the state. Houses in many municipalities, the Collecting System of unused materials is produced. There are no databases of the collecting systems, collected and managed by the municipalities. It is difficult for anybody to get access to the producing of unused materials.
2) Unused materials are named as “Valued Garbage”. Much of the unused materials are shipped to areas where it is inexpensive to have it transformed and sold as new products, containers, and other things.

The Collecting System was set up in Moriya, Japan, in 2004. It collects shredded paper and cardboard for experiments with producing Paper Brick (Model 1:1) for constructing insulated dwellings. [Paper Dwelling > Learning by Sea Urchin, Model 1:1] is constructed out of cardboard gathered from the Collecting System. The dwelling is being used in the education place at the school. After, it will be moved under a bridge or other shelter as a way to integrate with the already existing constructions in the city becoming a part of the build environment.

A new neighborhood with a kindergarten and public school which are shared with the squatted area. The city will reach the land sooner or later. Then the conditions are that the squatted area has to adopt the urban model or leave the areas to further terrains.

A dwelling constructed out of unused materials, Monterrey, Mexico. A shed built in a small yard.

A dwelling constructed out of cardboard, Monterrey, Mexico. A shed that is used as a small sail.

A neighborhood with a kindergarten and public school which are shared with the squatted area. The city will reach the land sooner or later. Then the conditions are that the squatted area has to adopt the urban model or leave the areas to further terrains.
The gathered unused material was used for different purposes. Shredded paper was used for experiments with paper bricks for dwellings. The paper was used for papier-mâché models. Paper Dwelling > Learning by Sea Urchin, Model 1:1 was made out of cardboard and after a period at the Arts Initiative Tokyo, where it was used, it went into the Japanese recycling system.

Walking City was an activity with 78 persons at the Goshu Elementary School. After a few days of constructing more than 50 wearable buildings out of the cardboard, the city was asked that a few more be made. The original group split into a few to spread the knowledge of how to make the dwelling.

SS: For Beyond Green, you will make a model of the cardboard-and-bottle building method that you’ve just tested in Mexico; here it will be built using material collected on campus. Since you’ve already tested the system in Mexico, do you see the model functioning here as a learning tool for others—a way of modeling/spreading your ideas—or do you still have things you want to learn by making a new, portable version of the structure?

JC: Both can work because the method could be improved every time that a construction is made. The help of others and uses of different technologies could change the construction design and process a lot. It depends on many circumstances.

RL: We use scale models and 1:1 models precisely as you suggest: as learning tools. These are both for us and for others. Models are wonderful because they allow you to mentally place yourself inside the worlds they suggest. We can’t take everyone with us to Mexico, but being in the same room with the 1:1 model will get you a lot closer and urbanism; etc. This happens more in a symbolic way than the one we usually know.

SS: Could you explain the basic principles of Collecting System? This has been the main focus of your work thus far, and your central project for Beyond Green comes out of it.

RL: Collecting System is constructed out of some of the possibilities of a given situation and points out some of the social and economic structures that dominate the space. We use leftovers, in relation to thinking and discussion about how to merge our work into already existing and expanding urban planning and economies. From the perspective of sustainability it is often not an optimal solution (if you can even talk about optimal situations in this case).

SS: Collecting System has so far been put into practice in several locations. Could you talk about how it’s been implemented in Japan and Mexico?

RL: In Japan, unused materials produced by households are state property or private property but managed by the municipalities. In addition, pirate companies are collecting them. As a consequence it is difficult to get access to unused materials. We set up another collecting system for getting material for the experiments, and flyers were distributed that informed about the work that the materials gathered through Collecting System would be a part of. We got appointments with different offices and shops, and we collected the unused material by car or by bike; some persons delivered it to the school.

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JC: The dynamic in Mexico was about creating a workshop while the collection system was working simultaneously. The neighborhood was involved in the collection of material and was shown part of the final results of the construction and how this waste can be transformed into another type of object with its own values as a construction and as a dwelling. After that a small group of people previously working in the workshop helped to construct a room 6 x 3 meters wide. As a result of the initial construction, people asked that a few more be made. The original group split into a few to spread the knowledge of how to make the dwelling.

SS: Could you explain the basic principles of Collecting System? This has been the main focus of your work thus far, and your central project for Beyond Green comes out of it.

BB: We pay close attention to multiple aspects of a local situation. We ask several questions. Are there material and human resources that are leftover or unused? Who has access and control of these materials? What conditions are people living in? What can our abilities and concerns do to make something useful occur in this situation? We then identify those aspects that concern us the most and try to implement a useful project that includes, among other things, learning about waste, energy use, employment, local social and economic ecologies, self-empowerment, and so on. We make posters, models, and other supporting material that helps us learn and also spreads the knowledge we accumulate.

Collecting System is constructed out of some of the possibilities of a given situation and points out some of the social and economic structures that dominate the space. We use leftovers, in relation to thinking and discussion about how to merge our work into already existing and expanding urban planning and economies. From the perspective of sustainability it is often not an optimal solution (if you can even talk about optimal situations in this case).

SS: Collecting System has so far been put into practice in several locations. Could you talk about how it’s been implemented in Japan and Mexico?

RL: In Japan, unused materials produced by households are state property or private property but managed by the municipalities. In addition, pirate companies are collecting them. As a consequence it is difficult to get access to unused materials. We set up another collecting system for getting material for the experiments, and flyers were distributed that informed about the work that the materials gathered through Collecting System would be a part of. We got appointments with different offices and shops, and we collected the unused material by car or by bike; some persons delivered it to the school.
show you how you could build something similar with your own waste. They are also placeholders of sorts. That’s also true of the papier mâché scale model for mushroom farming that’s included in the show. We will eventually build underground mushroom farms here in Chicago, but this will take several years to realize. There is so much to consider and actually doing it is highly illegal. The models make the ideas concrete and present.

SS: Could you talk more generally about the role of the drawings in your practice? They have such a particular and very charming style and color sensibility. They also serve many purposes: drawings can create an idealized space for play and open speculation; they’re a great way to circulate ideas and plans among the group as you’re developing ideas together; and they communicate your sensibility and ideas to others.

JC: Yep, they are charming. Drawings can be very powerful when they are shown as a guide. The drawings, like the learning posts, go beyond that place where they are the basic idea of a project to become a sketch of something that can become real.

RL: Drawings are very much like models, using a language that does not necessarily have to take into account things like bureaucratic conditions. Groups like Superstudio and Archigram did impressive work together through collages; models and drawings have been interesting to look at from the perspective of functionality.

SS: Your projects thus far have focused on problems of sustainability within the built environment. You’ve devised ideas and plans among the group as you’re developing ideas together; and they communicate your sensibility and ideas to others.

RL: One problem is that having somewhere to live is not considered a basic right. It’s a huge ongoing battle. In that perspective we have not been interested in sustainable design as much as we have been interested in looking at what getting a dwelling does for one’s life. There are many different things that control these parameters around the world: either you live in shadow cities, on squatted land, or on private property. In Copenhagen, it’s impossible to get a place without a lot of capital investment, and if you didn’t invest in a house before the real estate market started to boom, getting a home is now very difficult to manage. It’s one of the most expensive places to live in Europe. Many people have to live illegally in order to simply get to a place to live. The floating dwelling we did in N55 was built because there was a gray zone in 2000 about rules surrounding building on water. This is not possible anymore due to speculation or other interests. This means that the floating dwelling will be transformed into culture or business, so it can get a place in the harbor of Copenhagen, or it will be dismantled and either moved to a new place in true of the papier mâché scale model for mushroom farming that’s included in the show. We will eventually build underground mushroom farms here in Chicago, but this will take several years to realize. There is so much to consider and actually doing it is highly illegal. The models make the ideas concrete and present.

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BRENNAN McGAFFEY

in collaboration with

TEMPORARY SERVICES
Brennan McGaffey and the artists’ group Temporary Services collaborated on this project but have distinct practices. McGaffey has been developing a series of projects—the Intermod Series—for the past five years. These beautifully crafted objects allow the individuals who use them to temporarily disrupt much larger systems such as the electrical power grid and radio waves. Temporary Services has been working together since 1998. Their work is emphatically social: through short-term projects they seek to create dialogue and to emphasize the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. One key initiative, their ongoing Mobility series, involves portable archives and other materials that can be transported efficiently and used by Temporary Services or others as the raw materials for social events.

McGaffey designed and built the first version of the Audio Relay in 2002 in response to Temporary Services’s request for a device to store and broadcast an archive of audio works. It can broadcast them either locally—like a standard stereo—or over the airwaves as an unofficial radio broadcast. (Posters alert people within its small transmission radius of upcoming broadcasts.) McGaffey designed the piece for easy portability, and it can be powered in remote sites by solar panels and a standard car battery. Temporary Services curated the initial audio exhibition for the Audio Relay, which they broadcast in Chicago in 2002, but as the piece has traveled to cities from Baltimore to Leipzig others have taken over the curatorial duties: those who host the project are invited to add new audio works and curate their own broadcasts. A new audio archive will be created during the Beyond Green exhibition tour as exhibition venues add audio works to the Audio Relay.

Both in form and function, the Audio Relay embodies a nomadic, self-sustaining approach to producing and disseminating art: although it can be adapted for use in museum spaces and exhibitions like Beyond Green, it does not require such standard channels of art-world circulation. When it broadcasts the archive, the work allows individuals to enact change within large systems and also serves as a focal point for actual gatherings and virtual connections among people. And as a portable archive of works of art, the Audio Relay takes the private-museum-in-a-box premise of Marcel Duchamp’s boîte-en-valise (1934–41) and makes it generous by including not only an ever-growing group of artists who contribute material to the archive, but also a changing community of listeners.

Audio Relay, 2002–ongoing (2005 manifestation)
Painted wood case, audio transmitter, antenna, solar panels, electric cables, CD players, CDs, speakers, and stickers
Installation view at Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago
(CAT. 11)
Interview

Stephanie Smith: We’ll start the interview just with you, Brennan. Your collaborators, the artists’ group Temporary Services, will add their comments at the end of our conversation. Could you start by explaining how the Audio Relay (AR) came into being, what it is, and how Temporary Services was (and is) involved in the project?

Brennan McGaffey: In 2002, Brett [Bloom, of Temporary Services] approached me about designing a portable audio unit. The idea was that it could travel and accumulate a library of unusual audio CDs. But it wouldn’t just collect the CDs, it would also be able to play them and act as a small exhibit. I added a radio transmitter so that entire neighborhoods could become engaged. I’m responsible for the design and construction plus maintenance. The AR was made for Temporary Services and is part of their ongoing project on mobile structures. They also put together the Chicago version of the audio archive.

SS: The AR is one of a group of works that you call the Intermod Series. The series includes a number of objects that you have designed and engineered to cause subtle, temporary disruptions to public space and to invisible networks and systems like power grids and radio waves. Could you say more about the series, and how the AR relates to those other works?

BM: The Intermod Series is a group of projects I’ve created that generate some form of interference, which up to this point has been mostly electromagnetic interference in which I use radio, power lines, stuff like this. But some have involved atmospheric interference and I’ll probably come up with others in the future. I consider the AR to be part of this series.

SS: Could you describe one of the Intermod projects?

BM: My last project was titled Utility-intertied Signal Generation and Transfer (USG&T) (2003). The USG&T is a special portable electronic unit that I designed to plug into the electrical grid and automatically pattern a pulse-wave signal, distributing it using the network’s alternating current. The device transmitted a special type of signal—an Extremely Low Frequency signal—by using and altering the electromagnetic field surrounding the power network in localized areas of Chicago. The signal was inaudible and relied on a passive bioreception. (Additional information about any of these projects is available at the Intermod Series Website, including any updates.)

SS: You’ve said that the Intermod projects “generate interference.” This occurs in a literal way when you temporarily disrupt the electrical grid or radio frequencies. Could you also talk about interference as a strategy for your art practice?

BM: It creates something phenomena-like. If you put one of the Intermod projects in a place where someone is expecting something unusual then its effectiveness is neutralized. Putting art out where it isn’t expected is far more interesting. So the project starts as form of interference, but I hope it’s more than simply a disruption.

SS: Your projects usually disrupt systems in far-reaching but invisible ways. We can’t see the radio waves, but we can see and touch the objects that cause that disruption, as well as the logos and other materials that you design to accompany each Intermod piece. They’re very carefully designed; the Intermod Series has a consistent visual aesthetic. What’s the relationship between function and form in the Intermod Series?

BM: Hmmmm. Design of the objects and graphics would be what you mean by form, right? It’s all important. I immerse myself in design strategies that seem relevant for each project. For the AR I was looking at portable radio units, especially military designs. But I never take that too far. Familiarity is one thing, copying outright another.

SS: Were there other sources of inspiration for the objects? For the AR, for instance, were you drawing on sources apart from military technology? I’m thinking of things like sleek, super-lightweight camping gear.

BM: The antenna for the AR collapses or folds for storage. An elastic shock-cord runs through the center of the tubing and binds the antenna sections together. It stretches when you fold it. Anyone reading this who is a backpacker will immediately recognize this design as originating in lightweight tent pole construction. The materials are different, as antennas need to be conductive, but the use of the cord addressed perfectly the problem of keeping the pieces of the antenna together.

SS: Camping and military gear are mass-produced objects. The Intermod objects (thus far at any rate) are all laboriously handmade and have an impeccably finished look. Is that important to your concept for the work?

BM: That it’s handmade? No, not really, but most originals for mold making, even in industry, are still handmade. It would be fine with me if I could send something out to be produced somewhere else, but it’s simply not possible for financial reasons. My projects are mostly out-of-pocket. If money ever becomes available for it, I think the AR should be plastic mold-injected. Right now, it’s not as durable as it could be.

SS: I’m also interested in your use of marketing strategies for these underground, even illicit projects. For instance you have a “brand” logo for the whole Intermod Series, and each individual project has its own slightly retro-feeling logo that you’ve transformed into stamps, stickers, and at least one poster. Sometimes you’ve incorporated these materials into mailers that you send out anonymously; they’re like small multiples but also spread the word about the projects to those who can’t experience the piece in action.

BM: I’m not really marketing my projects, of course. But, yeah, the insidious public...
relations industry has proven itself to be extremely effective at mass opinion shaping. The history of its development is enlightening along with its connection to psychiatry, intelligence agencies, and so on. Clandestine versions of marketing and control are also very instructive. Borrowing from all these strategies can create a pleasant confusion. Designing logos is just part of this, along with the packaging and presentation. Functionally, logos also help identify the projects and give them focus since they are sent out anonymously.

SS: But that's not the case with the AR, is it? That project isn't anonymous at all.

BM: When these projects are ready to be sent out it just won't work if the first thing you see is my name in capitals, right? It's less important with the AR, but still, I wouldn't feel good about putting my name on the unit itself. With the other projects, it's very important that they blend in, at least initially.

SS: Do you think about your work as an activist or oppositional practice?

BM: Well, I don't know, I guess if you make an effort to be even mildly informed, how can you not and up in a state of opposition? Activism is important, especially now that the mainstream media is so thoroughly controlled. But I think I'm doing something else. I'm not sure what category it comfortably fits in.

SS: How do you see your work in relation to other art (past or current)?

BM: Well, there are certainly examples that could apply, but I think less and less about this. Or I just care less and less. It's not important to me that these projects fit into an art context. I find that what most interests me is outside of it, or acts as an alternative. The Yes Men come to mind. What they do is extraordinary. Locally, Lucky Pierre (an experimental performance group) has put together some very interesting stuff. And working with groups like Temporary Services can be very satisfying.

SS: How do you see the AR fitting into, or pushing against, sustainable design practices?

BM: I think some good stuff is happening in housing design. If you look honestly at our society, however, very little is sustainable in the long term. Sorry to bust out the doom, but it's just the way it is. So design that incorporates sustainable energy consumption is ahead of the curve. Everyone will have to square up to some hard realities eventually and probably sooner rather than later. The design for the AR is for me, more about portability. Using a car battery allows you to put it anywhere you want, outdoors, on a roof, wherever. And you can recharge the battery using the solar panels. But you can also run it off of any regular AC electrical outlet. So I guess it's both a sustainable and nonsustainable design.

SS: We'll shift now to Temporary Services members Brett Bloom and Marc Fischer. After Brennan produced the Audio Relay, Temporary Services took over the role of coordinating its use in an ongoing series of presentations and short-term broadcasts, starting in Chicago and then going on to other cities. Could you talk about the parameters that you establish for the use of the AR and for the kinds of audio works that are included in the ever-growing audio archive that it houses and broadcasts as it travels?

Brett Bloom: Independent music, experimental audio, field recordings, radio plays, interviews—these are all welcome additions to the audio archive. We really like to see projects that push the AR so that it is not just transmitting, but maybe creating, as Brennan has said, some sort of phenomenon or phenomenological investigation. Radio waves are things in the world just like colored mud or precious metals and really are a lot more open for experimentation than the commerce-induced blandness of most radio.
BB: We have also talked about more clandestine, boosted ARs that could “squat” the entire radio dial. We are nowhere near seeing something like this realized. We even talked about an AR that could interface more readily with the Internet, but again, this is only talk.

SS: Will the new AR have its own separate audio archive that’s distinct to the history of this object’s use, or will you try to keep the two archives synchronized?

MF: The two ARs can have different audio archives.

SS: What’s your best-case scenario for displaying it within a museum or gallery show? In an ideal situation, would it be broadcasting all the time, for instance? Do you think the piece is compromised at all for those who will only see it when it’s inert?

MF: There is so little exposure for so much of the audio work that is included in the AR’s archives that the more the CDs are being broadcast, the better. It’s intended to be used, not just displayed. We recognize, however, that interactive projects in galleries and museums are often subject to a great deal more handling and abuse than they can sometimes withstand. We have seen “out of order” signs on exhibits is always depressing.

We admire Brennan’s design and craft of the AR—it is a beautifully built aesthetic object with a design that holds up even when it’s not in use. But part of that beauty comes from seeing it function. Even unconventional uses can be wonderful. We observed gallery tech workers putting the AR to great use in Weimar, Germany, at the ACC Gallery. They used it to play their own CDs rather than the ones in the archives.

They placed radios throughout the gallery rooms so that they could listen to transmissions of their favorite rock and reggae CDs all over the building while they were painting the walls. This deviated from the AR’s intended function, but it was still nice to see the workers capitalizing on its ability to transmit.

Now that so many people have laptop computers, there could be other possibilities. Perhaps people could simply bring their computers to the gallery or museum and import CDs from the AR’s archives into their computers. They could then share the sound files using Peer-to-Peer File Sharing. Here, the storage capabilities of the AR could be put to use and a different kind of transmitting could be enabled without ever turning on the AR’s transmitter.

SS: Could you talk about how this project relates to Temporary Services’ other mobile archive project? Or to Temporary Services’ ideals and practices as artists?

MF: The AR is a tool that gives us another means of bringing creative work to broader audiences than experimental culture usually can. We are interested in interesting audio projects that deserve greater exposure. Radio is terrific for sharing sounds and information.

The AR is also quite practical to ship and use in other countries. It allows many under-recognized people with CDs in the archives to piggyback onto exhibition opportunities that may happen for Temporary Services or Brennan.

BB: We are constantly moving between different contexts and modes of working. We will work in a museum or cultural center but just as easily broadcast out of our apartments or Mess Hall, the autonomous space in Chicago that we run with five other people. The AR can be a radio station when it is not being presented as an art project. It is very hard to control and can be moved rapidly. We like this aspect of the project, as it is one of many means toward building our own culture that can’t be shut down by dominant powers.

April 2005
NILS NORMAN

Opposite: Ideal City, Research/Play Sector, Chicago, 2005 (detail)
(CAT. 14)
Nil Norman explores ways that urban regeneration efforts often homogenize public space and searches for alternative approaches. He draws on past and present utopian experiments in the United States and Europe, as well as activist tactics for urban intervention. Norman creates artists' books as well as drawings, models, and murals that blur boundaries between art and design. He has transformed some of these proposals into functional objects and structures but frames his practice primarily as an investigative and speculative endeavor.

For Beyond Green, Norman created a new mural-sized, brightly colored banner. The central part of this fantastic landscape presents structures culled from his research on “adventure playgrounds”—a term used to describe vacant lots in Britain that have been turned into lively public spaces through community and child-centered design processes. Norman combines structures from different playgrounds to envision an idealized playspace and emphasizes its utopian possibilities through the inclusion of faceted geodesic domes like those designed by the visionary architect and engineer Buckminster Fuller. “Notebooks” flank this space and present ideas for two possible mobile structures. One shows Norman’s designs for “The Solarized Hydrogen Powered Public Space Research Vehicle”; the other depicts simple, portable water filtration systems that could be built primarily from cast-off materials and used to purify wastewater. The artist presents these projects in different representational strategies, ranging from didactic (the notebooks) to architectural (the play structures) to cartoonish (the gloved hand). The surreal blend of visual styles and structures, set within a landscape in which grass becomes a comic-book parade of acidic drips, suggests a certain skepticism—maybe just a dash of black humor—about the possibility of actually implementing any of these progressive structures on a wider scale.

During fall 2005, Norman explored related ideas with University of Chicago students during a residency during which he taught an interdisciplinary course, “Spaces of Utopia: Contemporary Arts and the Environment.” This nomadic class used the city as its classroom; as Norman notes, it was “designed to function outside of the traditional classroom space. An experiment in interdisciplinary education, the class investigated the production of social spaces and considered the city as a multitude of ecologies. It included field trips to parks, gardens, arts spaces, and official environmental initiatives and their self-initiated, community-based counterparts or ‘parallel’ sites.”
Interview

Stephanie Smith: You often use large banners as a means to convey your ideas. Why?

Nils Norman: I use the computer graphics program Adobe Illustrator to make digital drawings that can be easily enlarged or reduced to pretty much any size without losing resolution. So postcards, leaflets, posters, banners, digital wallpapers, and billboards are very simple and fast to produce, making it a mobile, autonomous, and immediate way of working. I usually look at the site where the work will be exhibited, taking into consideration budget, architecture, type of exhibition, outside space, city space, etc., and then try and formulate an appropriate format that will work within those parameters. I am trying to explore the idea of these projects being forms of propaganda in terms of aesthetics and content.

SS: The wooden structures that you depict in the back of your mural for Beyond Green remind me of the adventure playgrounds that you documented in your book An Architecture of Play: A Survey of London’s Adventure Playgrounds (2004). (Adventure playgrounds are neighborhood playscapes built in vacant lots in London beginning after World War II and often designed by, or in close collaboration with, children.) How do the adventure playgrounds relate to the other images gathered into this work?

Nils Norman: Over the past four years, I’ve researched adventure playgrounds as well as makeshift architecture and ideas that revolve around the concept of “Non-Plan” planning. Non-Plan is an idea that was floating around in the 1970s and 1980s that experimented with the idea of taking a city area and removing all planning regulations, enabling local people to design and build whatever they wanted. It was seen by many as a highly conservative approach to planning, but its links to the squatters’ movement and the idea of autonomous zones is very interesting. I have come to see adventure playgrounds as radical models of alternative public space—playful spaces of disruption, disorder, and undevlopment in direct opposition to the relentless privatization and dismal redevelopment of every sad scrap of urban space. Manhattan, for example, is still a vibrant and diverse city space. However, Business Improvement Districts (a form of privatization and gentrification in which the government creates partnerships with the private sector that are designed to improve business in different city areas) and other private initiatives have radically altered the city’s character; it has become more homogeneous, with less disruptive space.

SS: One of the central images in the banner you are designing for Beyond Green is a bus that you imagine transformed into a sustainably powered research vehicle. Could you talk about how this idea fits into your prior designs for research vehicles? For instance, do you hope to actually construct and use the Public Space Research Vehicle as you did the Geocruser (2001), which started as drawings, plans, and models but was eventually built through a commission by the Institute of Visual Arts in London?

NN: The research vehicles I have been designing are mainly fantasies. A couple of years back, I went on a research tour related to the Lebens Reform (Life Reform) movement, traveling with my friend, the German artist Stephan Dillenmuth. This was a movement that formally began around the mid 1890s. It was a reach toward a new way of living, a kind of proto-hippy experiment that encompassed many things to do with health, nutrition, dwelling, and clothing. They were the early vegetarians, naturists, and organic farmers. We toured museums, historical commune sites, farms, garden cities, and...
Ideal City, Research/Play Sector, Chicago, 2005
Printed vinyl mural (CAT. 12)
archives from Hagen in northern Germany to Lago Maggiore in Italy. We drove around in a very small sports car, and if we had had a hydrogen-powered, mobile live-in workstation, our trip would have been perfect.

The Public Space Research Vehicle is really just a proposal; I’m more interested in the ideas and research rather than the vehicle itself. The vehicle is just a framing device through which to view the content: uses of public space and the history of U.S. utopian experiments in agriculture, economies, and communal living.

SS: If you were to use the Public Space Research Vehicle, what sites would you visit? What kinds of utopian communities are you most interested in these days?
NN: I would visit all the utopian communities I could find, from the Earthships in New Mexico to Brook Farm, Massachusetts. Garden city experiments and urban farming initiatives would also be important stops, as well as any remaining squatted buildings in the U.S.

SS: This fall, you’re going to be in residence here at the University of Chicago teaching a course on environmental activism and contemporary art that’s going to be an almost entirely mobile, field-trip oriented class. Could you talk about that course and the relationship between your art and your interest in radical pedagogy?
NN: The course is based loosely on an idea the anarchists Colin Ward and Anthony Fyson formulated in the 1970s, in which all the classes occurred outside in the city. Their idea was to enable high school kids to start thinking about and even possibly implementing urban planning ideas themselves, in an anarchistic, do-it-yourself style. In Chicago we have ten weeks and ten trips in and around the city, visiting different alternative ecologies: economic, environmental, and communal experiments. Artists are now inescapably inscribed within urban regeneration strategies, and in order to start thinking about this bind critically we need to begin creating more disruptive and experimental methodologies, not just “neo-situationist spectacles,” which is how I see a lot of artist interventions developing. It is also an attempt to imagine the city as a multitude of ecologies and alternatives.

SS: How important is your art training to the work you do now? You mentioned once that you were part of a transitional generation in art school, so you had conceptual training and also learned how to draw.
NN: My education at St. Martins College of Art and Design, in Soho in central London, was interesting (1986-89). Our generation was on the cusp of change, from a more traditional formal art education to what we have now, a more interdisciplinary pedagogy. At St. Martins it would have been better if the institution were given over to the students for three years: it was the location and the other art and fashion students that made the school interesting. I left for Cologne the summer I graduated, and I learned more there about site-specificity, politically engaged practice, and the use of irony as a discursive and critical tool in art making.

On a general note, my practice as an artist is informed by ecological models and ideas, but this is only one small part of my practice—I don’t regard myself as an “eco-artist” in any way. I am focused on issues that are threaded through public space and urban regeneration. Ecological issues are one thread or one ecology amongst many.

June 2005

NILS NORMAN
PEOPLE POWERED

Opposite: Loop Multi-purpose
Coverall, 2003 (detail)
Quart can, printed label, and covers
postconsumer recycled paint
Artist Kevin Kaempf, who works under the name People Powered, has adopted a small-business model for his art practice. Operating with this “brand identity,” he creates small-scale public art interventions that offer simple solutions to problems of sustainability within daily urban life. All of his projects bear the energetically off-key People Powered logo, and he mimics corporate marketing and branding tactics as a means to attract wider participation in his projects.

Transport I, a new installation created for Beyond Green, consists of a shipping and display unit that documents People Powered’s composting and paint recycling programs, Soil Starter (2002–ongoing) and Loop (2003–ongoing). The installation includes samples from these projects; instructional, documentary, and marketing materials; and a set of do-it-yourself instructions that visitors can download from a computer, print onto waste paper, and take home.

Soil Starter is a small-scale composting network that Kaempf created for city neighbors who want to compost their kitchen and yard waste but don’t have the space or the inclination to do it themselves. He periodically collects and composes this organic matter, and then delivers “tea bags” back to the participants. These translucent packets contain composted matter that releases nutrients when watered (ideal for malnourished urban houseplants).

Loop deals with another common phenomenon: the cans of half-used paint that accumulate in our closets, garages, and workshops as we redecorate our homes and offices. Kaempf collects paint from friends, strangers, and institutions, combines it into new colors, and attractively repackages and distributes the paint as “Loop: Multi-purpose Coverall.” All of the venues presenting this project are encouraged to save their leftover paint for a period of time leading up to the exhibition and to collect additional paint from other people and institutions in their communities. Following Kaempf’s instructions, each venue may then mix this paint and use it to make a site-specific wall painting. The painting is then adorned with color swatches from each color of donated paint: stand-ins for the individuals—or at least, the individual colors—that have created this new hue. Extra paint goes into quart cans labeled with Kaempf’s Loop and People Powered graphics and is distributed by each venue at the close of the exhibition.

Transport I takes People Powered’s projects on the road, introducing new audiences to Kaempf’s sustainable processes and perhaps spurring them to action. If this occurs, it will be due to some mix of existing needs among potential “consumers” of his processes, the clarity and ease of Kaempf’s systems, and the visual appeal of his design sensibility: People Powered not only provides solutions to everyday problems but also attractive, contemporary packaging. People Powered’s processes provide catalysts for change in the behavior of small networks of people while embodying actual material transformation as things move through cycles of use and reuse.
Interview

Stephanie Smith: How did you get started with People Powered?

Kevin Kaempf: After leaving graduate school and moving to Chicago in 1999, I wanted to integrate a number of my interests. The process of making art for gallery exhibitions felt separate from my other interests in design, biking culture, and environmentalism, and I wanted to develop a set of parameters for an art practice that could integrate them. In particular, I wanted to use art and design as a format for communicating about environmental concerns and making change.

SS: In terms of design, were you interested in updating the aesthetic sensibility of environmental products and ideas?

KK: Definitely. For me it felt like many of the available environmental resources—like the books or Web site that offer information on researching composting or organic gardening—were completely related to the hippy granola aesthetic of the 1960s and 1970s. While I have an interest in that aesthetic, I started thinking about updating it and about merging sustainable strategies like recycling, composting, and organic gardening with a contemporary consumer aesthetic. I’m not alone in thinking about this: other artists are working in this way, and it is a trend in the commercial world as well.

SS: That’s one of the premises of People Powered: you’ve created a set of simple strategies or pilot programs for solving problems on a local level—in Soil Starter, gathering and composting kitchen waste for your neighbors; in Loop, collecting, blending, and redistributing leftover paint—and then you mimic slick corporate marketing tactics as a means to package and disseminate a set of practices that have a socially useful end. And you frame the whole thing as part of your art practice, which I want to get back to in a minute. First, though, as part of your preparation for People Powered you researched corporate branding strategies and logos. Which of the ideas or strategies that emerged from this research were particularly useful for you?

KK: As someone outside of the rhetoric of advertising, I was fascinated by marketers’ ideas about community: by identifying the allegiances of the consumer, they foster an idea of brand loyalty that makes a connection with a product or a company into participation in a community, which still somehow is based on your own individuality.

SS: That’s a common enough advertising technique: make individuals feel that a product affirms their unique identity and discerning taste but simultaneously links them to a group with which they want to be aligned. So, you were looking at this strategy more critically from your perspective as an artist and then appropriating it into the development of the People Powered brand.

KK: I especially wanted to infuse the visual language of corporate advertising with a notion of community that’s based on something more meaningful than marketing strategies. Part of that developed from the crazy feeling that I was getting from seeing how much “connection” happens through acts of consumption among people who are not our immediate friends and family. With the People Powered projects, I decided to take this on in a small-scale, grassroots way by building community within my own limits. Those limits include the physical limits of my neighborhood and also the limits of my personaliy, since I’d never really put myself in this kind of situation prior to this project. As the artist/designer of Soil Starter, for instance, I’m able to access friends and friends of friends and develop this small-scale composting network, which challenges me to put myself out there and also puts me into contact with people who may not initially have any interest in this as an art project.

SS: How do you talk about Soil Starter to the people who aren’t interested in it as a work of art?

KK: I leave room for people to be engaged in whatever way they like. There are several different levels at which the piece functions: it recycles material, and it also functions metaphorically as a work of art that transforms materials, frames ideas, and makes a concrete gesture that models ways that others can develop creative solutions to the problems that they might passively hope someone else is going to take care of.

SS: Do you feel that your identification as an artist gives you latitude to pursue socially engaged projects in ways that you might not be able to if you were working directly as an activist?

KK: There’s definitely something that happens when a visual artist works within another discipline as part of their process. We don’t necessarily come up with the best solution to the problem that we’re trying to frame, but on occasion we come up with something great because we’re not so close to this other discipline.
adequate community recycling. Certainly the city government here is trying to address this, and they are making headway. But we as citizens may be able to organize and develop possible solutions much more quickly, although on a smaller scale, than city government could.

San Francisco has a paint recycling program and collects compost curbside. So obviously these specific pilot programs are less relevant if exhibited in a city where these issues are addressed by the city government. However, the projects still resonate on the metaphorical level of addressing waste and overconsumption in our culture.

SS: How do you see your work fitting into current art practice?

KK: Artists have always included in their work ideas and issues that arise from the culture, which is what I feel I am addressing in my work. I have always been interested in the process of investigating and developing ideas that can be expanded into larger forms of public engagement. I’ve been involved in planning and executing various community-based projects, including a series of workshops and events focused on sustainability and social justice. I’ve also been involved in developing a network of artists and activists who work in a variety of media to address issues of inequality and environmental sustainability. This is one reason that I realized that the pilot programs rather than making a hypothetical project or proposal. By initiating these small-scale projects, I have learned just how difficult it can be to get something like this started. It requires a lot of back-end work in planning the logistics of collection and processing the materials. I have taught myself a process for this by trial and error. Based on my experience, I was then able to develop the framework for someone else to try it out.

One challenge with my practice in general is that I really get absorbed by the active recycling programs. I enjoy the planning and the execution of the programs and interacting with the people who provide paint and compost materials. However, this is only one half of my practice. The other component of the project is “the art part”–creating and framing the projects for an art context. Balancing my interest in both these arenas has been a challenge.

SS: Do you think the pieces will lose any of their punch once they move out of these small-scale local networks as the work travels? Will they gain anything from these new contexts?

KK: The work could gain or lose punch depending on where it is presented. The projects initiated in Chicago are a direct response to the lack of infrastructure in place for

SS: Is there a way that you see that happening in your own process in relation to Soil Starter or Loop?

KK: On a practical level, I completely ignored the bureaucracy that usually hampers this kind of activity if it is labeled as an officially sanctioned project, such as for clearly defined objectives for the programs. I started the Soil Starter project with the simple question, “What if I started collecting kitchen scraps from friends to compost?” As an individual artist, I had the privilege to try these projects without having all of the knicks worked out. Eventually I arrived at one possible solution to a problem that we have in Chicago (and in many cities). I would encourage others to work this way; I’d like to see more individual citizens trying something out and not waiting or hoping for some other group, whether it be the city government or some loosely organized activist group, to offer up a solution.

SS: Could you describe your new work for Beyond Green—Transport I—and your plans for it as a means of shipping/disseminating/marketing your projects? Ideally, how do you hope the institutions presenting the exhibition and the audiences who visit it will engage with the work?

KK: Transport I is a self-contained display for the projects Soil Starter and Loop; the booths and display systems you might see at a trade show or an expo influenced its design. Ideally, I’d like to find opportunities for it to be exhibited in different kinds of venues, in addition to the art exhibition context. The display includes all of the ephemera you would need to start one of these pilot programs in your own community: instructions, materials, and tools. By laying all of these out, I hope it will illustrate just how easy (or difficult) it can be to implement your own local composting network or paint recycling project.

SS: Could you elaborate on that last point? What are some of the challenges you’ve encountered with these projects or with your practice in general?

KK: I don’t want to idealize the projects or romanticize the labor involved in them. This is one reason that I realized that the pilot programs rather than making a hypothetical project or proposal. By initiating these small-scale projects, I have learned just how difficult it can be to get something like this started. It requires a lot of back-end work in planning the logistics of collection and processing the materials. I have taught myself a process for this by trial and error. Based on my experience, I was then able to develop the framework for someone else to try it out.

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SS: In conjunction with the exhibition's Chicago presentation, you will be teaching a summer course for high school students participating in the University of Chicago's Collegiate Scholars Program. Please tell me about that project and how you see it relating to the exhibition.

KK: The course is about exploring the diverse forms with which contemporary artists deploy politically engaged messages. Specifically, we will be looking at the rich history of Chicago artists creating works that frame socially relevant issues such as housing, social justice, organized labor, and environmentalism. Sometimes what the artist comes up with doesn’t really resemble what we might think of as visual art, and sometimes it doesn’t really relate to our idea of what activism is. In Beyond Green, there are a number of artists touching on disciplines outside of visual art and in essence designing possible answers to questions from that area of expertise. Our answers to those questions are at times very impractical, but they also allow for an opening up of the problem-solving process that can be very liberating. This is something I really relish, the problem-solving skills that can be developed and refined through training in visual art.

April–May 2005
DAN PETERMAN
Since the late 1980s

Dan Peterman has intervened into the systems through which ideas and materials circulate in contemporary consumer culture. He often uses postconsumer reprocessed plastic or retooled found materials in his sculptures and installations.

For Beyond Green, Peterman has "recycled" an existing installation entitled Excerpts from the Universal Lab (plan b). This work originated as a site-specific commission for the Smart Museum's 2000 exhibition Ecologies: Mark Dion, Peter Fend, Dan Peterman and has since been reconfigured into new projects for other exhibitions. All of these versions of the project use objects from an actual place, a now-defunct scientific laboratory formerly housed in a warehouse on the south side of Chicago. At the Universal Lab, a group of amateur scientific researchers gathered discarded items that they had scavenged from the University of Chicago's laboratories and loading docks and used these materials for their own research. Eventually the space became clogged, the operation closed its doors, and in 2000 its contents were almost discarded by the building's new owners. Peterman and others intervened and helped save and reuse many of these materials, some of which returned to the University of Chicago as artwork, went through the inventory process, and took on a new life as sculpture.

In this latest iteration of the Universal Lab, created for Beyond Green, Peterman has sorted some of this detritus into new, much smaller groupings contained within a series of elegant, rolling vitrines that evoke laboratory carts, globe stands, museum display cases, and sci-fi machines. The mobility of these carts echoes the nomadic nature of the objects they contain, which have accrued new layers of meaning and value as they have traveled from an initial functional life through several cycles of use and reuse. In addition to reusing materials, this project calls into question the art world's persistent demand for new work and the consumption of resources that this production requires.
Statement

Simultaneously a utopian research model, a reservoir of scientific lab equipment, a waste handling/reuse/storage dilemma, and, to varying degrees, an art project, the Universal Lab continues along its unique, hybrid trajectory. Since its inclusion in the Ecologies exhibition at the Smart Museum of Art in 2000, Excerpts from the Universal Lab has appeared in two prominent museum exhibitions; spent a year trapped in a U.S. Customs storage facility, where it narrowly escaped destruction; been the subject of a threatened lawsuit by its former landlords; and spent two additional years in a semi-trailer. The art world has played gracious host to the sprawling, rambling collection of matter that is at the core of this project but has not yet entirely gotten its arms around it. It seems to fit in catalogs, and briefly in large exhibition spaces, but not the storage lockers of permanent art collections. But the reluctance of art institutions and collectors to take that kind of plunge is understandable, and, I think, speaks to the heart of the matter.

It is the scale of the original collection that continues to energize Universal Lab. Within that enormity, a continual shift in polarities occurs between waste and resource value and valuelessness; historical relevance and triviality; sublime attraction to the senses; and grand annoyance. The Universal Lab has always felt like something larger than life, something that never should have existed at all, something utterly unregulated that grew quickly in the shadow of extreme regulation. It is the unlikely convergence of three things: the exaggerated, post-Manhattan Project, Cold War research budgets at the University of Chicago; human energy, measured in decades, dedicated to moving remains of those research budgets, around the clock, from point A to point B; and finally, abundant, nearby, affordable, unscrutinized warehouse space. The scale of each of those forces is what transformed the Universal Lab from a flawed, impoverished scientific research offshoot into something much more deeply, and humbly, compelling.

But it is this scale that has also fed the urgency behind uprooting it, evicting it, and, in the end, regulating it. The Universal Lab, in its current state, has been brought down to size. Rather than the negligent, hazardous, wholesale disposal process launched by its landlords in 2000, intervention by the Resource Center (a Chicago-based nonprofit) and volunteers over subsequent years has allowed for large amounts of its contents to be recycled, reused, or resold. In 2002 the University of Chicago stepped up and handled all radioactive materials with great care and concern, but after this brief period of cooperation it denied any obligation to address other hazardous materials. In 2003 the chemical inventory was at least partially identified and disposed of under professional supervision, at significant expense to the landlord. In early 2004, the 10,000 square foot of space that the lab had occupied since the 1960s was finally cleared, again at significant expense to the landlord. But this does not mark the end.

The semi-trailer load of materials from the Universal Lab had previously been drawn off from the main body. A rough estimate would place these excerpts at between one and two percent of the whole ... and other venues, as excerpt of excerpts, the process of further compartmentalization and streamlining will be evident.

Perhaps this is just a sign of fatigue. Hopefully, it’s a sign of something more. I’d like to think that a latent survival mechanism of the Universal Lab is kicking in. Maybe it’s here for good reason, once again knocking on the museum door, seeking asylum, near the nurturing loading docks that first gave it life.

April 2005
Opposite: A Hippo Roller for Our Rural Times, 2005 (detail) (CAT. 6)
Marjetica Potrč focuses
on the ad-hoc architecture and objects made by the residents of “informal cities,” a name she has given to the impromptu residential areas that exist around the edges and in the shadows of global metropolises. She studies how people around the world, living under these conditions, are solving specific problems without support from official sources: on their own terms, on their own time, and often outside the bounds of the law. She usually works in a case study mode in which she makes this necessary, everyday creativity visible within the gallery space. Her best-known methods include sculptural installations in which she re-presents “urgent architecture” in the form of temporary sculptural installations, and two-dimensional works that combine text and image, including photographic collage and her signature brightly colored, loosely rendered drawings.

Potrč’s contribution to Beyond Green comes from her ongoing series Power Tools, in which she applies her case study approach not to architecture but rather to small-scale objects that she has culled from the usually undifferentiated stream of consumer goods. The Hippo Water Roller featured here, made by the company Imvubu Projects, allows individuals to efficiently move large amounts of water over long distances. Potrč presents it along with a print that indicates some of the social benefits of its adoption. The full Power Tools series examines other commercially produced objects such as solar-powered flashlights and clockwork cell phones designed for use by residents of the informal city or “urban explorers” as well as by those in rural areas. These devices apply sustainable design strategies such as durability and self-power (through body movement or solar power, for example) to real social needs such as lack of easy access to electricity or running water. (Of course, the boundaries between necessary object and luxury item are fluid as things move among different contexts, and Potrč has observed that the clockwork cell phone has been picked up as a trendy gadget by Johannesburg urbanites.) Through her visual and verbal commentary, Potrč calls attention to the huge variety of applications of sustainable design and its varied roles in different social contexts.
communities that inhabit the two cities are alien to each other, with different value systems that breed a mutual mistrust. They coexist in close proximity, however, and must constantly accommodate each another. The divisions in Caracas are unmistakable. I had no problem accepting this fact, the permanence of this division. When you think about it, the fluidity of the division is, more or less, the only thing that is really permanent in Caracas. Everything else exists in a flux of decay and expansion in the midst of permanent crisis.

The formal city, once a proud modernist town, was now in decline and fast becoming a modern ruin. It seemed to me that it was losing its body as well as its mind, wildly and without regret. Oversized billboards, sometimes bigger than the houses they were built on, were left empty. The Parque Central building complex, once the pride of Caracas modernism, was deteriorating and being overtaken by nature. Built-on additions and vegetation sprouted from its monumental façades. The ground floor shopping mall was deserted, with barred windows barricading the shops. The elevators were not working. Parque Central seemed consumed by its own malaise and had apparently abandoned modernism’s quest to display the values of functionalism and consumer society. Parque Central’s demise felt almost biblical. Or did it? A block away, the Urban Agriculture Cooperative occupied a former public park: Red peppers and lettuce were growing in green fields and were being sold to passersby. Those who lived in the vicinity viewed the urban farm as an invasion of the rural into their urban landscape; the barrios, too, were considered a form of rural architecture, an alien growth in the modernist city. Though the barrios were not as nearby as the urban farm in the park, they were constantly present. From virtually anywhere in the formal city, you could see the outlying hills populated by barrio communities. Who were those people and why did they persist in invading the modern city with their urban farms and informal marketplaces? They had arrived in Caracas from the rural hinterland and had stayed, becoming the construction workers who built the formal city by day and their own city by night. The barrios are not planned settlements; they were created by individuals who built their homes on public land without obtaining any permit or title. These homes are self-initiated structures that have been upgraded and expanded as need arose. In Caracas, the barrios are growing, not decaying, and they exude a confidence in their own body. This is a rural architecture made of tightly interwoven buildings and alleys. The people who live in the barrios had prevailed against all odds, growing their houses as their families grew, shamelessly showing off this growth with construction wires that sprouted from every rooftop. This ephemeral city was clearly here to stay.

The City of Caracas

The city’s underground passages were full of people pressing onward, and always too close to my body. Above ground, the city weighed heavy. It was noisy and loud, and never slept. It was smelly and dirty. The tropical rains, which unleashed a pure natural energy, seemed to be the only thing able to calm the city down and give me a chance to catch my breath. Caracas is a pegan city. I felt its raw energy smelling of survival in the midst of individuals who stake their claims to happiness in an apparently collapsing city. Never walk through the narrow alleys of La Vega barrio alone. In the formal city, always take a taxi after dark. Push down on the gas pedal when the light turns red. Never stop at a traffic light at night, especially when you are driving alone. You must always be present in both mind and body, but above all listen to your instincts. Never plan anything. Events impose themselves on you easily in Caracas, whether crimes, floods or celebrations. I found that, once I had arrived, this dangerous and divided city would not let me go.

I came to Caracas in order to research the informal city, which is one way of referring to the barrios of Venezuela. In Caracas, this informal city, climbing up the hills, encircles and presses in on the formal city, which occupies the valley below. The
their survival strategies to utility infrastructures in a more focused way? Instead of shooting bullets into the municipal water pipes in order to get more water through an illegal water connection, they could take a different approach. Perhaps they could reduce their consumption of water. They would use less water if they had a toilet that did not need it. In this way, they would solve the infrastructure problem themselves, independent of municipal authorities. Our idea caught the attention of the community. The Dry Toilet made sense, after all. And so it was built by a team of construction workers from the community in La Fila, the upper section of La Vega barrio, on Raquel's property (if you can speak in this way about occupied public land); her house had never had a toilet before. Barrio buildings are self-initiated and self-upgrading structures that function on a small scale. I still wonder why no one had previously thought to apply their strategies—their tropicalism, their nonlinear logic—on a city-wide scale. For Liyat and me, it was extremely important that Hidrocapital, the municipal water company, supported our Dry Toilet project. It made sense in a city where reservoirs were quickly losing water. For the La Vega community, the project provided a long-term sustainable solution for the problem of waste water, radically reducing the community's water consumption. Houses collapse in the barrios not only because of the torrential tropical rains, but also because of leaking sewage. At one point Hidrocapital envisioned building full-scale models of the Dry Toilet in every municipality as an educational endeavor. Remember the urban farm in the middle of the formal city? This same cooperative considered erecting a Dry Toilet on its premises, but eventually decided against it out of a fear of controversy; the Dry Toilet might be seen as another invasion in the formal city simply because it can function on its own, without any connection to the municipal utility grid of the modernist city.

Looking back, I remember that Liyat and I both felt at home in La Vega barrio. Liyat eventually rented a room there and had to learn to bathe with only one cup of water. In a way, the Dry Toilet happened to us because we could see potential in an informal solution. I cannot speak for Liyat, but my heart is instinctually drawn to individually initiated small-scale strategies, in the context of Caracas, where the social state never really materialized, individual initiative is a natural route to take.

There is a certain humor in the fact that my project about informal Caracas ended up being the Dry Toilet. Or was it, perhaps, intuition that had made me build, way back in 1997, the Core Unit—a structure with a similar volume and content as the Dry Toilet—in the Landesmuseum Munster? This was the first case study I presented in a museum, and it proved to be a strategy I have followed ever since. I discovered the information behind the Core Unit in a National Geographic magazine. In Honduras, such units were part of the suburban housing program. A small building provided by municipal authorities was equipped with electricity, running water, and a toilet; residents would then add on rooms as their finances and building skills permitted. Raquel pursued a similar strategy. When we stood on the ground between the Dry Toilet and the house she had built with her own hands—first collecting wood, then using mud to fill in the cracks in the wooden structure—we were in fact standing right in the middle of an additional room she had planned. Raquel’s house was a growing house in the midst of a growing city.
Istanbul: Rooftop Room

Rooftop Room is a site-specific project realized for the 8th Istanbul Biennial. It consists of a tin roof constructed on top of a privately owned flat-roof house in the Kustêpe suburb of Istanbul. After the exhibition closed, the family who lives in the house replaced the temporary curtain walls with permanent walls.

I was asked by curator Dan Cameron to create a project for the biennial, which had the title Poetic Justice. I received the invitation while in Caracas, in the spring of 2003. At the time, I was deeply involved in the Dry Toilet project, which Liyat Esakov and I, along with the local community, were developing in La Vega barrio. It became a matter of ethics for me that whatever project I made for Istanbul should be as meaningful as I thought the Dry Toilet was.

I knew from the start that I did not want to make this project in a public space. I am aware of the fact that Europeans are unconditionally committed to public space, but this is something I have never really understood. Such dedication to the concept of public space has little to do with democracy and is, therefore, untouchable. For Poetic Justice, then, I decided to create a project in private space. I focused on a family. By making a project in private space, I pointed to the ongoing process of the privatization of public space but did not waste any energy criticizing it. At the same time, I pointed to individuals—the people who make up a city. If public space thinks of citizens as a group, my project attempts to think of citizens as individuals.

My proposal was to build a temporary roof on top of a privately owned flat-roof house. I asked the Istanbul team to find a flat roof where a family planned to build another floor. I presumed that my project, though conceived as temporary, would likely stay in place, and this eventually proved to be the case. Orton Akinci got back to me, saying that they had found a family in Kustêpe, a suburb of Istanbul, who would be glad to get a temporary roof. I flew from Caracas to Istanbul. A construction worker showed us around. The roof was quite large. We decided to build a seventy-square-meter tin roof using metal construction. No plans were drawn up, and the construction was agreed on orally. The temporary intervention was approved by the city. During the biennial, blue plastic curtains were chosen to encircle the space, and it all looked quite beautiful. A plastic table and chairs—a popular style that has seemingly been around forever, were placed there. I never saw the completed Rooftop Room in person, but Orton sent me pictures showing how the family had subsequently upgraded the area under the constructed roof earlier this year. And so the project did turn into something permanent. I was happy to see that the plastic table and chairs were still being used. Rooftop Room touches on several issues. This was a public project in a private space. In creating it, I diverted money from art to life. The project was not centrally located—Kustêpe is an outlying suburb of Istanbul. Surprisingly, biennial organizers raised no questions either about the dislocation of the project or about the fact that a public project was being implemented in private space—visitors to the biennial could not enter the site. By making a temporary project that became permanent, I pointed to the legitimacy of so-called temporary architecture, which is, I believe, the most permanent aspect of contemporary cities. There are a few details that I especially love about this work, such as the temporary curtain walls being replaced with permanent ones and the fact that a private household was taking care of a public project.
But what I remember most from my Liverpool visit is this. Although widely consid-
ered to be mismanaged, Liverpool’s misguided investments and radical formal attempts to solve its problems (including the continual resettlement of residents from low-
rises to high-rises and back to low-rises and, my favorite, the transformation of a slum—the city’s most densely populated area—into a park) have left the city with its eyes open and its body flexible to change. Social politics is another issue. I find it strange for people to be resettled three times simply for the sake of new approaches to housing issues and yet not to really have a say about it.

As late as the 1960s, Liverpool had a slum that could have been straight out of a Charles Dickens novel. There was even open sewage there. The slum was eventually razed and the area transformed into a park. The population was resettled into tower blocks in socially subsidized housing. I was told that residents used to throw garbage out of the windows—this was something I had seen firsthand in Caracas, too, in the social housing complex of Ventitres de Enero. Of Liverpool’s seventy-two tower blocks, sixty were recently torn down, with the population being resettled in bungalows. Not that residents really appreciated the change. They had formed tightly knit communities in the tower blocks and felt uneasy about the security problems they faced in the new environment.

For my project, I focused on the Bispham House tower block and its residents. My original proposal was to attach a bay window to an apartment in the high-rise and upgrade the architectural addition with... it would be inspiring for tenants to be independent of the municipal power grid, to be able to generate their own energy.

In the process of implementing the project, which lasted a year and a half, the bay window was transformed into a balcony. The change mirrored a new trend: balconies have suddenly become a desirable feature... now, they hide it. They serve to survey the outside territory from inside the house, just as in Liverpool and Manchester.

I heard from Paul Domela that the tenants where we installed the Balcony with Wind Turbine are happy with the enlargement of their private space, as well as with the wind-generated energy, and want to keep the balcony, which offers a fantastic view of Liverpool. Alan, the caretaker, has been volunteering to show people around who visit the tower block.

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MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

Opposite: paraSITE (Bill S.), 1998
In use in Cambridge, Massachusetts (CAT. 16)
Michael Rakowitz uses both practical and metaphoric strategies to call attention to social needs. His work has had a strong (but not exclusive) emphasis on inequities within the built environment, such as the inaccessibility of affordable shelter or access to private space in most cities, or the imputed legacy of failure within America’s public housing system. His hybrid art practice draws on a variety of other disciplines—design, architecture, urban planning, history, activism—and has so far included sculpture, site-specific architectural intervention, performance, and installation. In some cases his projects are designed solely for presentation within gallery spaces. Others are meant to function outside, often by offering temporary, imperfect solutions that simultaneously fill needs and bring attention to untenable situations.

In 1998 Rakowitz began collaborating with homeless men in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to design the *paraSITEs*. Apart from a few prototypes made of vinyl and nylon, these inflatable structures are made from cheap, easily available materials—tape and white, clear, or translucent plastic bags—and then inflated with waste heat vented from buildings. When deflated, each *paraSITE* folds into a small, light carrying case. When used within public spaces, they become arresting public sculptures as well as shelters from cold weather and prying eyes. Rakowitz customizes each shelter for its intended occupant, a process he relates to portraiture. He has distributed shelters in Cambridge, New York, and Baltimore. The shelter that he created for Bill Stone is presented in *Beyond Green*; Stone gave it back to Rakowitz once he no longer needed it, and it retains the stains of use in the streets. The *paraSITE kit* (2005) presents materials needed to build one’s own inflatable structure.

Rakowitz is also represented through a more recent project, *(P)LOT* (2004). Like *paraSITE*, it uses temporary, portable structures to reveal the complex ways in which public and private space are distributed in contemporary cities. Rakowitz designed an ingenious collapsible framework meant to fit standard, commercially produced car covers. When set up on the street, *(P)LOT* becomes a tent that looks like a car, creating a new kind of urban camouflage. As with the *paraSITE*, the whole system collapses into a carrying case for easy portability. As the title suggests, the piece is currently a pilot project; *(P)LOT* could eventually usurp the usual function of parking lots and metered spaces by transforming them into ersatz camping sites: *(P)LOT* users—pilots—would rent plots of city land for their own temporary, private, and independent purposes.
Michael Rakowitz: The paraSITE project started when I recognized that I was only getting so far in the space of architectural critique in an architecture school. Design projects needed to at least receive the criticism or the voices of the people who would be using them. When I invited that group of homeless men—Bill Stone, George Livingston, all those guys—they came to the studio and listened to me talking to them, and after I'd been talking one of them said, "So you're an architect." In a very suspicious way, and I said, "Oh, no, no, I'm an artist." They just laughed and said, "This is fine; you're not so far from being like us." Suddenly I wasn't part of the problem, as an artist, I was close to being destitute myself. So they felt some kinship and also a sense that as art, this wouldn't have to fall within the confines of being legitimate and profitable.

From there it was clear that the project would become more alive and interesting the less I was visible in it. The only part that I design on my own is the most boring but also most critical part of the paraSITE structure: the attachment to the building. Its symbolism is important, since it's like some weird form of architectural CPR where one edifice is giving life to another by blowing life into lungs. It also serves a key technical function by recycling the wasted energy of the city. The homeless come up with the shapes for their shelters. They give form to this symbolic method of communicating what life is like on the streets to those who don't know.

Stephanie Smith: Because of this personalized, collaborative design process, the paraSITEs also function as portraits (or self-portraits) of their owners. Could you talk about some of the design features that the homeless requested for their shelters and how those functioned on both symbolic and practical levels?

MR: In one instance back in Cambridge, I had been introduced through George Livingston and Bill Stone to Freddie Flynn. During our first conversation, Freddie, a relatively shy man, said, "Bill and George told me you'd build me anything I want." I answered, "Yes, Freddie, that's right." He looked at me intensely. "Anything?" he asked to which I again answered, "Yes." What I didn't know was that Freddie was an avid science fiction fan, and he came back to me with a torn out piece of a sci-fi magazine that had a picture of Jabba the Hutt printed on it. He wanted a sculpture/shelter of Jabba the Hutt, by far the most complicated design I've had to produce to date, but also a pleasure.

On a more pragmatic note, a December 1999 article about the project in the New York Times exposed a city "loophole" that one homeless man, Michael McGee, decided to address in the design process. The city's "anti-tent laws" were alluded to by the spokesperson for the New York City Police Department, Detective Walter Burnes. This obscure law states that any structure, domed or otherwise, standing in excess of 3.5 feet above the ground and capable of housing someone inside, is considered a tent, and use of the structure on city streets is considered illegal camping. Given the incidence of homelessness in New York City, these laws are clearly meant to anticipate the possibility of "tent cities" and to prevent against an appropriation of "public" space. In response to the ordinance concerning height, McGee raised the question of what would happen if his shelter were shorter than the 3.5 foot maximum, thereby challenging the defensive efforts of the city and circumventing the law.

My relinquishing of control has been a big part of a lot of the projects that I've done; I like public art that enlists the audience as vital collaborators in the production of meaning. Of course, there are times that such an open system can only lead to failure, but I think that failure is highly underrated. Artists need to reclaim this right to fail. SS: Absolutely: there are times that you need to run with an idea and see what happens. Where do you see failure within the paraSITE project?

MR: Earlier, you had asked me if I categorize it as design or art. I would say it's a failing design project, because if I were a designer my responsibility would be to devise a solution. Maybe this is a problem with design practice. Maybe we should pick problems and throw more problems at them in order to create an enraged but highly valuable public dialogue about the problem. So for me, when (former New York mayor Rudy) Giuliani got angry about this project, or when he want nuts and enforced all these anti-homeless laws that, by the way, had already existed in the city's charter, he may have been doing the city a favor by agitating a dormant issue into something that created a sense of solidarity with the homeless. So, the failure of paraSITE as a design project may put the onus on designers to provide proposals for a longer-lasting structure to get the homeless off the streets, instead of prolonging life on the streets, which is what my project does.

SS: Have you kept in touch with these homeless men over time, and do you find they are still using your structures?

MR: A lot of them are. In New York it has been harder and harder to keep track of this, because after September 11, you don't fuck with building ventilation, so it's become harder to do this project. I'd say there's been a decrease in the number of New York homeless who want the structure, but there's been an increase in Baltimore. It's amazing how much extra space exists in that city. One of the interesting parts of the history is that several people who are no longer homeless have given back their shelters.

SS: Did they ask you to pass the shelters on to someone else?

MR: No, they understood the shelters as being their own.

SS: That makes sense since you design each structure in such close collaboration with its user.
MR: One came back from this guy named Bruce Wayne DeBose. Huge, delightful guy. He was amazing. He's so big, and the shelter is something like eleven feet long and four feet wide, and it's tall. When he gave the shelter back he didn't see it as a rite of passage, exactly, but it was no longer something he needed, and he told me to take it back, use it, show it on TV, tell his story.

SS: So you've released these works into the streets, off they go, they're personalized and active and alive, and some of them come back to you. Is it strange to then see them presented in museums?

MR: I don't have any problem with it. It's important that the shelters are presented along with the photographs so the work isn't misunderstood as performance. Proximity to this thing that clearly was used can also cause some discomfort for the audience. There have been preparators who have said, should we clean it? And I've said no, because it's important that they retain the marks of use. One of the exceptions is the piece up at Nato Thompson's show.

SS: The Interventionists (at MASSMoCA, 2004).

MR: Right. That was a one working sketch. I wanted to see if this thing would hold up and once I knew it would, I made one for Joe Haywood based on that prototype.

SS: So you wouldn't make a new piece for an exhibition, but there are two other options: you might show one of the functional shelters if its owner gave it back to you and gave you permission to show it, or you might show a prototype.

MR: Absolutely. The one that's in The Interventionists was also included in the Cooper-Hewitt Design Triennial. That's where a prototype really makes the most sense.

SS: There's a way that the minaret alarm clock serves a similar purpose to your shelters, right? It's a temporary, inadequate solution to a larger social need.

MR: Yes. Ultimately the project is set up to fail. I would love for Minaret to disappear because someone builds a minaret in the middle of the city that connotes that there are these important people amongst us... I'd like to know that in 30 years we'll all be embarrassed about it. That's optimistic, but it's related to my desire for paraSITE. It would be great if that project were never done again because somebody came up with some amazing new affordable housing initiative and found a new way of sustaining human life in the city. Both projects are ways of making the invisible visible.

SS: That works in both actual and metaphoric ways in paraSITE: you had initially proposed using black plastic for the shelters, but the homeless men with whom you were collaborating saw that as dangerous both since they wouldn't be able to see out of the shelters and also wouldn't be visible to passersby.

MR: It was great for me to hear that. It was a practical thing but it was also symbolic, so we were speaking the same poetic language. They didn't have any privacy issues but they had security issues—they wanted to see potential attackers, and they also wanted to be seen. That's the kind of thing that you can never figure out for yourself when you're just designing in your studio. A lot of my projects have taken that trajectory: presenting a platform and then letting people enter that platform.
FRANCES WHITEHEAD

Opposite: Primary Plus, 2005 (detail) (CAT. 14)
Frances Whitehead delves into the intersection of nature and culture in her work. Her earlier projects incorporated computer-based visualization tools to make models of organic forms such as viruses, which she then adapted as sculpture. Recently, she has looked more specifically at the impact of human activity on watersheds, exploring creative systems of remediation, visualizations of future urban development, and sculptural means to depict statistical information.

*Primary Plus* focuses on the relationship between design and disaster. For this project, Whitehead uses the classic strategy of bringing found objects into the gallery space, relying on the museum’s authority as a framing device to allow viewers to reconsider objects that have other functions in the so-called real world. In this case, she offers a selection of large, commercially produced, inflatable objects that are designed to collapse and fold into small packages in order to be transported and reused in response to environmental and social disasters. These include bladders to hold drinking water for humanitarian needs, tanks to hold gray water for firefighting and other needs, and “booms” to contain toxic spills. Whitehead has chosen a selection of objects that can be edited and arranged in each exhibition venue to form an installation that suits the available space. At the close of the exhibition, Whitehead will return the inflatables to the company that produced them so they can be reused as product samples or in the field.

Whitehead wants to call attention to the many-layered ambiguities of these containers. They are sturdy, reusable, and made to help staunch environmental problems and so fit some aspects of sustainable design, but they are also emblematic of a culture that offers surface solutions rather than seeking to address root causes. In addition, Whitehead chose the specific examples presented in *Beyond Green* in part for their formal appeal; with their strong colors and simple forms, the sculptures look at home in the gallery. Once placed in that rarefied arena they strongly recall the industrial aesthetic of minimalism, which maintained an entirely different, particular chain of associations, which foreground the tension between the social and formal concerns of art and artistic practice.

*Primary Plus*, 2005 (detail)
Variable selection of commercially produced inflatable objects and their cases
Installation view at Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago (CAT. 19)
Interview

SS: How did you first get interested in sustainable practices? FW: When I first moved to Chicago, I started a garden on the side lot next to my house. I’d never had a garden, never wanted one. Like many urban people who react to the absence of nature in the city, I became very involved with gardening and eventually it became part of my work, an extension of my prior interests in art and science. Working in the garden helped me become more knowledgeable and more tuned in to natural systems and environmental issues. I had thought I was just going to make a flower garden, but first I had to deal with the soil, which was full of debris. That got me thinking about reclamation. Many years have passed since then, and through the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I teach, I have had the opportunity to spend time with some sustainable design theorists and was exposed to that discourse on a philosophical level.

SS: Could you talk more specifically about how this affected your practice? FW: Five years ago I realized I had been looking backward, lamenting a lost purity of nature, paradise lost. This was getting me nowhere; I needed to become more proactive. I became more politicized in general, and that led to a radical change in my work from a more romantic excavation of historical and botanical subjects to a proactive and politicized body of work. I also looked at my own life and realized that I was living a modernist art lifestyle in a big cavernous place with more space than I need. So my husband and I are building a smaller, leaner home and studio that incorporates principles of sustainable design. Actually, it was through searching the web for cistern liners for the house that I found the inflatable objects that will be presented in Beyond Green; some of the same companies that make these objects also make the cistern liners, which we need for water reclamation at our new home.

SS: Could you describe these objects and your project? FW: The project, Primary Plus, presents examples of a type of monumental, collapsible, industrially produced object that is currently in worldwide use. These brightly colored geometric forms are the embodiment of a new global emergency and disaster response culture and are used by military, corporate, survivorist, and humanitarian organizations for spill containment, fire fighting, and temporary storage of liquids. They’re color-coded for the end-user: typically blue or white for potable water, black for nonpotable water or fuel, tan or khaki for jet fuel and military applications, yellow for high visibility, and orange, the most expensive and therefore ubiquitous color, for gray water and disposable contents. I’m bringing a selection of these found objects into the museum where they function in relation to a minimalist sculptural aesthetic, as well as to their intended use in disaster response. Ambivalence is a key term for this project. Things operate at a juncture between understanding them as part of an art-historical iconography and seeing them as functional objects. This slippage between what something is and what it appears to be is very extreme in this case. That interests me, I also find their scale compelling, because it begins to hint at the magnitude of the environmental issues facing us. I’m also interested in places where Enlightenment categories of material culture dissolve and art blends into anonymous design.

SS: Let’s talk about the objects in their first lives as functional items. Do you think they’re examples of effective, sustainable design? FW: This is another ambivalence within the project. Toxic spills and industrial “accidents” clearly need remediation, and the ingenious devices designed for this purpose—the objects I’m showing—do an environmental service by helping to sustain beaches and wetlands. However, do sophisticated remediation strategies perpetuate unsustainable practices such as shipping crude oil across the oceans? Does the automobile inscribe the design of these inflatable devices? Are they perhaps both reactionary and sustainable? If so, what are they sustaining? The status of the inflatable tanks used to supply potable water for humanitarian relief is just as ambiguous. In refugee camps and areas of unexpected drought, these devices are a godsend, allowing fast, inexpensive, efficient delivery (by aircraft drops) of drinking water. In the future, will these devices become as familiar as the gas tank? Fresh water, already a crisis in many parts of the world, represents a new global economy built on a strategy of shifting resources that is transient, nomadic, and extra-geographic. Perhaps to see this as dire is nostalgic, sentimental, or provincial. As design and environmental philosophy have moved beyond ecological or green design into the more complex model of sustainability, one central tenet is the need to design proactive systems on the front end, moving out of a reactive mode. Further, sustainability might only be achieved by recognizing the impact of “inscriptive” design, design that produces situations and behaviors that go on to “design” other situations and behaviors that in turn “design” the designers. Sustainable design theorist Tony Fry calls this “ontological circling.”

SS: You’ve borrowed all of these inflatable objects from the companies that make them. Could you describe the responses when you proposed this project? FW: The owner of one company, Dr. Fakhimi of Texas Boom, Inc., is an academic who started making these products after working for years as a chemical engineer. Referring primarily to oil spills, he told me, “Engineers helped create this mess and we need to figure out how to clean it up.” When I told him the nature of the exhibit, he said, “They should give you a medal for raising these issues.” Clearly he was receptive; he got the project. He did not seem surprised that I see these objects sculpturally and appreciate their high level of craft, which of course is necessary for them to function.

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FW: It exposes them to the museum as a viewing space, as a place where ideas are pre-
presented, aestheticized, and consumed. Aesthetic issues aren’t in play when an inflatable
water tank is being used to fight a fire. These objects need the museum to raise these
questions, because when they are out in the world you never really “see” them.

SS: Let’s talk about their function within the museum.

FW: Yes. I don’t think of this as sculpture. I think of them as part of a conceptual proj-
ect, as props that elucidate a conceptual framework. I really don’t think of these as
sculpture, because that gets into a peripheral inquiry about authorship, craft, and
uniqueness. Of course the minimalist sculptors in the 1960s opened this door; they had
other people make their work and established that the artist’s hand and touch did not
have to exist in the work, which was already hinted at by numerous other works—
Duchamp’s art, collage, etc. The minimalists made this really clear: I just walked through
the door they opened by appropriating these inflatables into my own work.

SS: Moving these things into the gallery space is a classic maneuver. It brings them into
a “wrong” context that allows them to be perceived aesthetically, as sexy, tactile, well-
made objects. It also provides a little breathing room so one can think about them not
only in relation to art-historical categories like “minimal sculpture” and “found object,”
but also in relation to their actual use. In the gallery, they can raise questions about com-
plex issues of sustainability and design in a way that wouldn’t be possible when they are
used for disaster response.

FW: Yes. I am definitely thinking about them as primary structures. Also their colors aren’t
primary but they’re close, they’re crayon colors. They’re primal, too.

SS: And by primal you also mean their use in the world, dealing with our basic needs for
water and safety?

FW: Yes.

SS: It’s interesting to think about another tension or ambiguity, this time between
objects that meet a primal need and those that, when presented as art, have a kind of
playfulness—here as a side effect of being inflatable.

FW: Yes. When they’re inflated they appear cheerful and comic, and depending on how
they are laying around the space, they can look very humorous.

SS: Sitting here in your studio, I’m looking at a black, nonpotable water tank. It’s partly
the angle at which I’m viewing it, but there’s a certain menace to it. The ways these are
presented will definitely have an impact on the attitudes that people attach to them.

FW: Absolutely. Their position in space is really important, because it establishes not
only the formal configuration, but also the mood. Proximity is also significant—the
degree to which the public is allowed to walk right up to them and begin to use their
bodies consciously or unconsciously to measure what size they truly are.

SS: These configurations will change as the show travels: each venue will have the
opportunity to choose from a “menu” of inflatables that you’ve provided, to create
arrangements that suit their spaces.

FW: As I said, I think configuration is important. You need at least two, since they inform
each other visually. A configuration might also include stacks of the uninfated folded
ones or their carrying cases. When they first arrived, they were each packaged in their
own individual carrying case with nylon rope and grommets and plastic ties. They’re
portable; they stack; they go where they need to go for emergency response.

SS: We’ve talked about reasons why these forms are visually satisfying and how they can
connect back to different moments in art history and to things that are familiar from
everyday experience, but the visual connections fall flat unless the objects can trigger
reflection about these other networks you mention.

FW: It is hard for me to think about that aspect of my work. Yet people point it out to
me, and at moments like this, as I try to unpack something with assistance, I start to see
it—many of my works are about systems but are manifest as objects or things. The way
material culture operates, the knowledge objects hold, and the cultural roles that they
play as embodiments of systems, are not very well understood. It’s hard to talk about,
but that’s really at the heart of my interest in sculpture.

June 2005
WOCHEN
KLAUSUR

Opposite: WochenKlausur banner installed outside their temporary office at Midway Studios, University of Chicago, 2005.
Based in Vienna, this group of activist artists has been working together since 1993. They leverage the resources of art world institutions—museums, for example—to devise concrete means of addressing specific social problems. Their projects always involve a residency of up to eight weeks; during that time they bring diverse groups of people together to develop solutions to the problem under consideration. Their name translates as “Weeks of Closure” and describes the intense, productive time of the residency. WochenKlausur creates small-scale but long-term solutions; in their words, “artistic creativity is no longer seen as a formal act but as an intervention into society.”

Recently WochenKlausur has established several small-scale initiatives to upcycle materials into useful new objects. (Upcycling is a process in which waste materials are put to new uses without being broken down into component parts; for example, transforming stop-light glass into red, yellow, or green vases.) Their project for Beyond Green—their first residency in the United States—builds on this prior work. While in Chicago for three weeks during the summer of 2005, WochenKlausur members worked closely with a group of University of Chicago students and other volunteers to research and implement an initiative to upcycle byproducts of museum exhibitions, theatrical productions, and other waste materials. During the residency, they set up a temporary studio/office on campus in Midway Studios, the historic building that houses the Department of Visual Arts. From that home base, they compiled a network of potential collaborators and conducted a test upcycling effort: they designed, built, and delivered furniture to a Chicago women’s shelter.

WochenKlausur’s projects are unabashedly instrumental, and they work to develop solutions that can continue without their involvement after the residency ends. In Chicago they started a new entity called Material Exchange, which will continue the work of linking waste materials, designers and design students, and people in need. Four students from the University of Chicago and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago who collaborated with WochenKlausur during their residency have taken on the leadership of this new organization and have already begun work on several upcycling projects, including a trial partnership with a Chicago design school and the production of the furniture used in Beyond Green. Thus the conversations and collaborations that comprise the heart of every WochenKlausur residency are already generating lasting, sustainable networks and alliances among the participants. Material Exchange is the primary result of their work, but the project is also represented within the exhibition through drawings, a documentary DVD, and the upcycled exhibition furniture.
Second, the mythos of art can be useful when one attempts to realize an intervention in the political field. For example, in 1989 the artist Patricia L.A. Paris designed an installation to light a long, narrow, underground passage in Whitechapel, London. This meeting point for criminals was to be lit with four floodlights, brighter than the light of day; the plan won a design competition but was never executed. Shortly before her project was to be set up, lighting was installed in the passageway by the community itself, which also took the opportunity to clean up trash and pigeon corpses. Paris was infuriated. Her planned floodlights had lost their purpose, so she withdrew the project. And yet it had been her idea to improve the passageway’s lighting. Her intention was realized, even though she had contributed nothing more than her plans. With the help of her art, the authorities had been compelled to take action. As an average citizen she might also have achieved the same thing, but she would have had to place an official request for better lighting, like many others before her, with forms, waiting lists, and fees. Months later she would have received a letter that informed her that the current circumstances made it impossible to fulfill her request.

Third, the media reports more about the dullest cultural events than about the most exciting social work. Through newspapers, radio, and television coverage, pressure can be put on decision makers. For example, when WochenKlausur had already made all the arrangements necessary to set up a mobile clinic.

WOCHENKLAUSUR

Statement

WochenKlausur was formed in 1993, when Wolfgang Zinggl invited eight artists to work with him to solve a localized problem during the exhibition 11 Wochen in Klausur at the Secession (an exhibition hall for contemporary art in Vienna). During the span of that exhibition, the group developed a small but concrete measure to improve conditions for homeless people in Vienna by making medical care available to them through a mobile clinic. Since 1993, more than 600 homeless people per month have received free medical treatment at this clinic. An invitation from the Zurich Shedhalle followed in 1994. There, WochenKlausur worked with members of the government and social service groups to establish a hotel for drug-addicted women. Invitations from art institutions in Austria, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden, and the Netherlands followed. A total of twenty projects have been successfully conducted in recent years by teams that have involved a total of more than fifty artists.

WochenKlausur often faces questions about why our projects should be considered “art.” In what many people understand to be traditional art, a great diversity of materials are formed and manipulated. Marble, canvas, pigments, and other materials have been points of departure for many kinds of creations, and through these media, the artist’s imagination takes tangible shape. In activist art, sociopolitical relationships take the place of those material substances. As with marble or the painting surface, this substance is not infinitely malleable. In order to transform existing circumstances, the limits of variability must be recognized just as they must be in traditional art. This means that the hurdle—the envisioned transformation—must be carefully set; it must be realistic but also high enough that one can speak of a noticeable change. The goal is to design a recognizable and sensible change and then accomplish it. For example, an artist could take it upon herself to get a one-way traffic regulation for her street repealed because she recognizes the senselessness of the regulation. She would do everything possible to realize her plan, just as the Baroque master made an effort to realize his plan for a ceiling fresco in a cathedral regardless of whether he personally put his hand to the task or not.

We are often asked, “Why must a sociopolitical intervention be art? Can it not simply remain what it is?” We answer with our own questions. Why must Joseph Beuys’s Fat Chair (1964) be art? Why are Duane Hanson’s hyper-realistic polyester figures categorized as art while Madame Tussauds’ wax figures are not? Why must a black square be art if it could just as well have been painted by a house painter as a color sample? Of course, a sociopolitical process can also have nothing to do with art. All around the world, public projects and initiatives are successfully completed without even the slightest consideration as art. For example, Gregor Hilvari, a priest who ran a shelter out of his own home in Hollabrunn, Austria, thought out an ingenious rotation system in order to offer more refugees beds than the law allowed, thus protecting them from deportation. He didn’t receive any art professorship for his achievement. Why art, then?

First, with every successful project that is recognized as art, intervention in existing social circumstances increases in significance. The word “social” is then used more positively again. Just as art can make certain “new” materials suddenly more appealing, it can also decrease the nimbus of pathos and the presumption of a “do-gooder syndrome” that often surrounds social efforts.
Fourth, experience from the completed projects shows that in many fields an unorthodox approach opens doors and offers solutions that would not have been recognized in conventional modes of thinking, such as those of science, social work, or ecology. During a project to improve the sense of well-being in a Viennese secondary school classroom, WochenKlausur simply ignored the Austrian standards for school construction because they were completely inappropriate in meeting the pupils’ needs. This is an advantage for artists, since experts in other fields must conform to the existing guidelines in order to avoid potential difficulties in their professions, even when the guidelines are clearly preposterous.

WochenKlausur does not claim that artists should necessarily have better ideas and problem-solving strategies than other groups. But there are many reasons why such interventions should be carried out by artists—as well as by all other people—if they are efficient. When obvious deficiencies in the social sphere await action, and when their solution does not require years of training or special experience, one has a responsibility to participate in finding solutions outside the framework of official directives and organizational structures. Clearly, when these activities are carried out by artists at the invitation of art institutions and are recognized by a community as art, then they are art.

Chicago Project for Beyond Green

Responding to this exhibition’s title and tenor, WochenKlausur, which mostly addresses social problems, decided to combine both a social and an ecological approach within its project for Beyond Green.
For every stage set or exhibition design many objects have to be built for temporary use. Therefore an abundance of material like wooden boards, display cases, glass panels, fabrics, and other odds and ends from past shows at museums and theaters accumulates and is generally disposed of after use. Materials that one person considers waste may be the raw materials of a new product for another. For this reason, WochenKlausur has set itself to the task of building a chain between institutions such as theaters and museums that have useable leftover material, social institutions that know what kind of necessities like furniture, interior fittings, and so on are required by people in need; and design schools and institutions that could create ways to upcycle the surplus material in order to produce the required utilitarian objects.

In Chicago, WochenKlausur members worked with University of Chicago students and volunteers to initiate an organization to create this chain. After meetings with a number of social organizations, we discovered a huge demand for furniture and interior fittings for entities such as homeless shelters and clothing pantries. We gathered lists of leftover materials, starting with waste from the Smart Museum, and extended out to involve other Chicago-area museums, theaters, and like institutions that are willing to make their surplus available. Design schools and departments have agreed to join the network and will help transform the materials into new things.

Alongside the organizational work, WochenKlausur has produced an upcycling example. Deborah’s Place, a homeless shelter for women, asked for outdoor furniture such as tables and seats for their courtyard. Cable drums, wooden boards, hoses, tripods, and other discarded materials were gathered and brought to the workshop at Midway Studios. There, we upcycled the material according to the expressed need, prepared it for outdoor use, and delivered it to the shelter. WochenKlausur also developed another set of furniture designs, which Smart Museum staff built as prototypes to travel with the exhibition along with documentation of the residency.

To carry on this work we and our collaborators founded a new, non-profit organization named Material Exchange. Material Exchange is now led by team of students from the art departments of the University of Chicago and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. They are continuing WochenKlausur’s project by developing Material Exchange into a sustainable organization; they will plan and establish the proper system to coordinate this new network of institutions, organizations, and design schools.

August 2005

WochenKlausur thanks project participants Ada Baden, Basile Canevas, Samuelle Chang, David Hernandez-Casas, and Amelio Collado de Soto; Material Exchange members Sara Black, Qaid Hassam, and Charles McKinzie Hasrick; videographer Irena Knezevic; and all of those who lent their time and expertise to the development of the project.
ANDREA ZITTEL

Opposite: Raugh Shelving Unit with Fiber Form Bowls and Found Objects from A-Z West, 2005. Laminated ACR plywood, cardboard boxes with burlap and plaster, fiber form bowls, and found objects. (CAT. 22)
Andrea Zittel has been working at the intersection of design and art since the early 1990s. Her art initially took the form of appealing, utilitarian fashion and furniture, a project that started as a strategy of personal self-sufficiency and developed into a coherent body of material that she presents under the “brand name” A-Z (A-Z Uniforms, for example). In the late 1990s, Zittel moved from New York to a remote high desert site in California in order to pursue more focused explorations of ideas and materials. She describes her home there, A-Z West, as “an institute of investigative living” and notes that the “A-Z enterprise encompasses all aspects of day-to-day living. Home furniture, clothing, food all become the sites of investigation in an ongoing endeavor to better understand human nature and the social construction of needs.”

This multipart installation samples Zittel’s larger, ongoing project, A-Z Advanced Technologies. In these simultaneously philosophical and practical investigations, Zittel has devised ways to simplify daily living, which for her includes her work as an artist. She has developed processes to make art from simple methods, using easily available renewable or waste materials such as wood, cotton, wool, and even junk mail. In the installation presented in Beyond Driven, the artist used commercially produced carpet and paint as an abstract backdrop for several discrete elements: a billboard prototype; one of her trademark plywood shelves adorned with hand-felted bowls and found objects; and an abstract shape that she crocheted by hand.

The latter plays with art history to subtly underscore Zittel’s utopian aspirations for a new mode of daily living. Through its dramatic shape and its title—Forward Motion—this irregular piece of handicraft recalls the work of revolutionary Russian painters and designers who tried to enact radical new ways of living and working almost a century ago. In such works, Zittel embraces the speculative uses of art: in a recent interview she noted, “I am not a designer—designers have a social responsibility to provide solutions. Art is more about asking questions.”

Single Strand Shapes: Forward Motion (Big Black and White X), 2005
Crocheted sheep and llama wool (CAT. 23)
Statement

A–Z West is located on 25 acres in the California high desert next to Joshua Tree National Park. Since fall 2000 the cabin and grounds have been undergoing a conversion into our all-new testing grounds for our “A-Z designs for living.” This desert region originally appealed to us because it seemed that one could do anything here—which we are finding out isn’t exactly true! It is also the historical site of the five-acre Homestead Act. In the 1940s and 1950s legislation gave people five acres of land for free if they could improve it by building a minimal structure. The result is a seemingly infinite grid system of dirt roads that cuts up a very beautiful desert region. In the middle of each perfect square of land is a tiny shack—most of them long since abandoned. The area and its history represent a very poignant clash of human idealism, the harshness of the desert climate, and the vast distances it places between people.

Initially, the primary focus at A–Z West was on production and how to develop new materials and new kinds of fabrication techniques. After working outdoors in 110-degree temperatures and contending with seemingly infinite budget problems, I believed that there must be a way to make interesting and significant art for less money, and less physical toll. This led to the search for a new technology: A–Z Advanced Technologies. Looking for the most plentiful and least costly resource available, I decided to find a way to use my paper waste as a building material. Stacks of old newspapers, magazines, mail order catalogs, and office debris were almost overwhelming in their volume, and were ordinarily something that I had to haul to the local dump. To turn paper into a moldable material it is first shredded and pulped. Then it is packed into a series of plastic molds, which slide into a grid of steel frames so that the pulp can dry outdoors in the hot sun. The installation of the Regenerating Field consists of a grid of 25 trys that spills down the hill in front of the A–Z West Homestead. The work references both the aesthetics of earthwork installations (like the Lightning Fields by Walter de Maria) and the industrialized format of modern day agriculture.

Dried paper pulp is lightweight, incredibly strong, and can be molded into shapes that look like fiberglass, concrete, or even travertine stone. And of course the dry, moistureless desert, where A–Z West is sited, is perhaps the most perfect place for this type of new technology. Although eventually I plan to use my process to build furniture and larger structures, the initial attempt has been to create an attractive, durable wall panel. Something that could camouflage bad walls and add softness and texture to a room. A little like the phenomena of wood paneling of the 1960s and 1970s, but without all of the connotations of that era.

Since 1991 the technical and conceptual evolution of the A–Z Uniforms Series has been gravitating toward an increasingly direct way of making my own garments. After finally reducing the tools of production to simply crocheting the strands of yarn directly off of my fingers, I began to consider the material that I was using. What if I could trace the strand of yarn back to its original form as fiber? Now I am finally beginning to make the most direct form of clothing possible by hand, “felting” wool directly into the shape of a garment and thereby inventing my own ways to make shirts and dresses. Because the clothing is made as one piece there are no seams involved, and when it is finished I use a safety pin to connect the two sides so that it will stay on! I have encapsulated this body of work under the heading A–Z Advanced Technologies, which plays off the way that something can be both incredibly primitive and quite sophisticated at the same time.

2003
Allora & Calzadilla
1. Returning a Sound, 2004
   Single channel video projection with sound
   5 minutes, 41 seconds
   Collection of the artists; courtesy
   Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

2. Under Discussion, 2004–05
   Single channel video projection with sound
   6 minutes, 3 seconds
   Collection of the artists; courtesy
   Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, and
   Lisson Gallery, London

Free Soil
3. F.R.U.I.T, 2005
   Interactive installation with wood, cloth awning, wood boxes, styrofoam,
   paper wrappers, computer equipment, and three Iris prints
   Fruit stand: 7 ft. 6 1/2 in. x 7 ft. 8 in. x 6 ft. 6 in. (2.3 x 2.4 x 2 m);
   computer terminal: 40 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 17 3/4 in. (102.9 x 59.7 x 45 cm);
   Iris prints: 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm) each
   Commission, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

Brennan McGaffey
4. Learning Model: Mushroom Garden, 2005
   Papier-mâché and acrylic paint
   21 3/4 x 29 3/4 x 15 3/4 in. (55.2 x 75.6 x 40 cm)
   Collection of the artists

Marjetica Potrč
5. A Hippo Roller for Our Rural Times, 2005
   Utilitarian plastic and metal object, and printed drawing (inkjet print)
   Object: 47 1/2 x 27 1/2 x 19 1/2 in.
   (120.7 x 69.9 x 50 cm); drawing:
   61 x 33 1/2 in. (154.9 x 85 cm)
   Collection of the artist; courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York

Michael Rakowitz
6. paraSITE (Bill S.), 1998
   Vinyl, nylon, and attachment hardware
   60 x 48 x 116 in.
   (152.4 x 121.9 x 294.6 cm)
   Collection of the artist; courtesy
   Lombard-Freid Projects, New York

People Powered
7. Transport I: Loop and Soil Starter, 2005
   Wall installation with recycled paint and paint swatches; wood case with stool,
   computer equipment, metal cans, sample kits made of biodegradable plastic,
   encasing inkjet prints; paint sticks, paper, soil, and organza
   Display case, closed: 64 x 45 x 20 in.
   (162.6 x 114.3 x 50.8 cm); installation dimensions variable
   Commission, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

Frances Whitehead
8. Primary Plus, 2005
   Variable selection of commercially produced inflatable objects and their
   cases
   Installation dimensions variable: Mr. approx. 48 x 74 x 82 in.
   (121.9 x 187.9 x 208.3 cm); max. approx. 96 x 420 x 186 in.
   (243.8 x 1066 x 472.4 cm)
   Courtesy of the artist with special assistance from Texas Boom, Inc.
**WochenKlausur**

20. Intervention to Upcycle Waste and Museum Byproducts, 2005
Single channel video with sound; two framed drawings (ink on paper); two inkjet prints; four benches, one table, and one shelf made from salvaged materials (wood, plastics, and moving blankets).

Installation dimensions variable; two drawings: 8 1/2 x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm) each; two prints: 11 x 8 1/2 in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm) each; benches: 18 x 48 x 11 in. (46.4 x 121.9 x 29.2 cm); table: 18 x 30 x 30 in. (45.7 x 76.2 x 76.2 cm); shelf: 7 1/4 x 72 x 12 1/2 in. (19.1 x 182.9 x 31.8 cm)

Collection of the artists

Furniture designed and built by John Preus for Material Exchange; video by Irena J. Kniezevic Commission, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

**Andrea Zittel**

The following are part of an installation that also includes a painted wall and carpet

21. Prototype for Billboard at A-Z West: “These Things I Know For Sure #1,” 2005
Flashe and polyurethane varnish on birch plywood

41 x 71 in. (104.3 x 180.3 cm)

Hort Family Collection

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**Allora & Calzadilla**

Jennifer Allora (American, b. 1974)
Guillermo Calzadilla (Cuban, b. 1971)


Jennifer Allora holds an MS from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Study Program. Guillermo Calzadilla holds an MFA from Bard College and a BFA from the Escuela de Artes Plasticas, San Juan.

20. **Free Soil**

Amy Franceschini (American, b. 1970)

Myriel Milicevic (German, b. 1974)

Nis Rømer (Danish, b. 1972)

**JAM**

Marianne Fairbanks (American, b. 1975)
Jane Palmer (American, b. 1976)
Amy Franceschini (American, b. 1970)
Myriel Milicevic (German, b. 1974)
Nis Rømer (Danish, b. 1972)

JAM’s most recent work includes personal power (2003–ongoing), sun/light (2002), during which public newspaper dispensers were rigged to distribute booklets with light-sensitive drawings and photographs; and transform/transport (2001), a visual demonstration of the collective capacity for people to generate electricity through daily activity. The artists’ work has been seen in several group exhibitions, including Dragged City, Rincón, Puerto Rico (2004), I’ve got an Answer! I’ve got an Anthem, Portland, Oregon (2005), United Net-Works Mobile Archive Tour, Sweden (2003), and Save the Experimental Station, Chicago (2002). Together Fairbanks
and Palmer cofounded Noon Solar, a portable power design company. They also collaborated with other artists to form Mes Hail, an experimental cultural center in Chicago.

Dan Peterman holds an MFA from the University of Chicago and is involved with the Chicago-based groups Temporary Services and the Department of Space and Land Reclamation. In addition, Bloom helps to run Groupies and Spaces, an e-zine that functions as a platform for the collection and distribution of current and historical information on activist art.

Julio Castro is a founding member of Tercerunquinto, a group that has been internationally recognized for architectural interventions that are usually mobilized around the intersection of social and spatial concerns. Recently, Tercerunquinto built a sculpture at Monterrey’s Outskirts (2002) for a marginalized, impoverished area of Monterrey, Mexico, with the intention of creating a new public space for community use. In 2004 the group was selected to receive a portion of Germany’s largest monetary art prize, the blueOrange. Major group exhibitions include Dedicated to you, but you weren’t listening, Power Plant Gallery, Toronto (2005), and MuCA ROMA, Mexico City (2004).

Rikke Luther and Cecilia Wondt are two of the founders of the Danish collective N55, which blurs boundaries between art and design. Major group exhibitions include The Interventionists, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams (2003), Living Inside the Grid, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2003), and the Venice Biennale (2001). www.learningsite.info

Brennan McCaffey

(British, b. 1966)

Brennan McCaffey has had solo presentations of his projects at Lampo (2003), TBA Exhibition Space (1999), and RX Gallery (1996), all in Chicago. He has also participated in a number of group exhibitions and collaborations including Audio Relay (2002–ongoing), an autonomous, mobile radio station; Low Altitude Atmospheric and Civic Modifications (2001), a five-month project hosted by Temporary Services that consisted of mood-enhancing micro-modifications of Chicago’s near-atmosphere environment; Active Music: A New Music Marathon, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2000); and Wall Work, White Columns, New York (1998). McCaffey is the recipient of the Richard Driehaus Foundation Individual Artist’s Grant (2001) and a Finalist Award from the Illinois Arts Council (2000). www.intermodseries.org

Nils Norman

(British, b. 1966)


People Powered

Kevin Kaempf (American, b. 1971)

Kevin Kaempf has created programs that address a variety of ecological issues within the city. These include Soil Starter: Logan Square Composting Network, a composting program on the Northwest Side; Loop: Multi-Purpose Coverall, a piece that focused on the recycling of household paint through reprocessing, mixing, and redistribution; Collection Continues, a paint store fully stocked with recycled paint; and Shared: Chicago Blue Bikes, a project currently in development to utilize “junked” bicycles that are salvaged, rebuilt, and distributed at subway stations along the Blue Line.

Kaempf received his MFA from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Major group exhibitions include Fine Words Butter No Cabbage, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago (2004), Public Planning, Experimental Station, Chicago (2002), and PIFO: M&M Art Projects, San Juan, Puerto Rico (2002). www.peoplepowered.org

Dan Peterman

(American, b. 1960)

Dan Peterman is the founder of the Experimental Station, a nonprofit organization based on Chicago’s South Side that will open in late 2005 as an incubator for arts, culture, and community initiatives; its rehabbed building implements architecturally and socially sustainable design. Peterman’s work has been featured in solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2004), Kunsthalle Hanover (2005), Kunsthalh Basil (1998), and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York (1996); and in group exhibitions including Skulptur-Biennale Münsterland, Kreis Steinfurt, Germany (2003), Pyramids of Mars, Barbican Centre, London (2001), the Berlin Biennal (2000), Dream City, Museum Villa Stuck, Munich (1999), and Korrespondenzen/Correspondences, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, and Chicago Cultural Center (1994). Peterman holds an MFA from the University of Chicago and teaches at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Marijeta Potrè

(Slovenian, b. 1953)

Marijeta Potrè’s solo exhibitions include MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts (2005), De Appel Foundation, Amsterdam (2004), Ariege Kunst Galerie Museo, Bolzano, Italy (2003), and the Guggenheim Museum, New York (2001). She has also...
Michael Rakowitz
(American, b. 1973)


Frances Whitehead
(American, b. 1953)

Frances Whitehead’s most recent solo exhibitions have been at the Oronski Contemporary Sculpture Center, Poland (2004), and Galerie Menotti, Vienna (2003). Her work has also been featured in many group exhibitions, including Post-Nature, Center of Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw (2003–2004), Unnaturally, Independent Curators International, New York (2003), and History of the Monoprint: 1880 to the Present, National Gallery of American Art, Washington, D.C. (1996). Whitehead has also been involved in several public art commissions and installations, including Watermarks, an installation presented in conjunction with the Mt. Desert Island Biological Laboratory, Maine (2003), and Water Table, a collaborative project for Settlement: Realizing Civic Discourse, Spoleto Festival, Charleston, South Carolina (2002–2004).

WochenKlausur
Since WochenKlausur’s membership has changed over time and the group wishes to emphasize the collective nature of its practice, the current members wish to do the following:


Andrea Zittel
(American, b. 1965)

Recent solo exhibitions of Andrea Zittel’s work have been held at Andrea Rosen Gallery (2005, 2004, 2003), The Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (2005), Regen Projects, Los Angeles (2004), Philomene Magers Projekte, Munich (2003), IKON Gallery (2001), and Deichtorhallen, Hamburg (1999). Major group exhibitions include Paratext, Centro Cultural, Tijuana, Mexico/San Diego Museum of Art (2005), Critical Mass: Territories of Chicago (2002), and La Casa Encendida, Madrid (2002). Zittel received her MFA from Rhode Island School of Design, and her BFA from San Diego State University. Recent awards include a grant from the Coutts Contemporary Art Foundation as well as the Deutschen Akademischen Austauschdienst (DAAD Grant).
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