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September 29, 2011

When Life Becomes Art

By KEN JOHNSON

At the Olympic Restaurant on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, customers who heed the call of nature are in for a pleasant surprise. The grungy stairway leading to the second floor is ominous, but on opening the door to the unisex lavatory, they will discover a clean, well-lighted bathroom with the black tile floor, sleek stainless steel fixtures, dark wood wainscoting and gleaming white sink of a high-end corporate washroom. It is a work of art — not just figuratively, but literally. Called “[Power Toilet / J.P. Morgan Chase](#),” it is a fully functional copy of an executive bathroom at that investment bank’s offices, created by the collaborative art-making group Superflex.

The Superflex bathroom was unveiled last Friday as part of “[Living as Form](#),” an enthralling, philosophically provocative round-up of 20 years’ worth of socially engaged art. Organized by [Creative Time](#)’s curator Nato Thompson, the show is mostly housed in the raw, cavernous interior of the Historic Essex Street Market; the Olympic occupies a corner of the same building.

It represents efforts by more than 100 artists to expand definitions of art and change social conditions by inventive, nontraditional means. Low, temporary walls of stacked concrete blocks and gray metal shelving units divide the space, creating an ambience that suggests a revolutionary militia’s headquarters. (The layout was designed by the architectural firm [Common Room](#).)

Some of the artists veer toward symbolism. For “[Palas por Pistolas](#),” a project orchestrated by Pedro Reyes, 1,527 guns were collected in a Mexican town racked by drug-related violence. The weapons were melted down and turned into shovels that were then used to plant trees on public-school grounds. Some of the spades are on display at the start of the exhibition, along with a young tree, which will be planted in a community garden after the show ends.

Ambiguity is not commonly a feature of social-practice art, but “Golden Ghost,” an installation by [Surasi Kusolwong](#) resembling a piece of 1960s-style scatter art is an exception. It is a two-foot-deep field of colorful factory-thread waste, in the depths of which are hidden six pieces of gold jewelry. Visitors who dive in and find one can keep it. It could be argued either way whether this is a satire about grubbing for material wealth or a metaphor about searching for spiritual meaning.

But most of the projects aim without ambivalence for pragmatic, real-world results. For “[Operation Paydirt/Fundred Dollar Bill Project](#),” Mel Chin has invited people here and all over the United States to fill in the outlines of printed cartoons of hundred dollar bills. An armored car will deliver almost 400,000 of these bills to Congress in a bid to prompt legislation and financing to cleanse lead-contaminated soil in New Orleans.

Some enterprises are hard to distinguish from social outreach programs. Since 2001, a group called [Women on Waves](#) has traveled in boats around the world providing women’s health and reproductive care, including abortions. Their vessels have been included in international art exhibitions, but to call what the organization does art, in however expanded a sense of the term, is to invite a question: What is gained by viewing certain programs as art rather than social work?

This is a point to which huge quantities of learned and often theoretically abstruse verbiage have been devoted in journals, art magazines and conferences. The most persuasive argument is that breaking down the usual divisions between categories like art and social activism is liberating, energizing and consciousness-raising for both: art can escape its ivory tower, and activism can be more creative. Utopia rises in the visionary distance.

It is typical of many a social-practice action, however, that the whole experience can only be had by those directly involved from beginning to end. The rest of us must imagine a project like Mr. Chin’s by reading descriptions of it and studying photographic and video documentation, ephemera and publications. How are we to form opinions about this kind of work if we know about them so indirectly? The problem is compounded by descriptions that often sound as if they were written by and for bureaucrats, which frequently is the case, given the genre’s dependence on institutional financing.

Some descriptions are more imaginatively appealing than others. Speaking at a [conference](#) held at the Skirball Center at New York University on the day of the opening, the Czech artist [Katerina Seda](#) described a project that sounded like a Monty Python sketch. In 2003 she went to a town of about 350 people and did a survey to find out how they spent their time. She learned that they all did pretty much the same things — shopping, cleaning, cooking, eating, watching television and so on — but that they did them at different times.

So, with the mayor’s blessing, she organized a day when everyone was to do the same thing at the same time. At the end of the day, there was a beer party for the whole town, and at 10 o’clock it was lights out. It would be nice to think that the townspeople experienced some enlightenment about, say, the possibility of creating alternate realities. Conventionally categorized forms of life may not

be as fixed as we tend to believe.

In any case, Olympic Restaurant regulars will be pleased to know that the new bathroom will remain a permanent, usable fixture, an enduring testament to modern art's refusal to be fenced in.

"Living as Form" runs through Oct. 16 at Historic Essex Street Market, 80 Essex Street, south of Delancey Street, Lower East Side; (212) 206-6674, Ext. 222, creativetime.org.



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