Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art

Traveling Exhibition Project Description

Curated by Stephanie Smith
Tour Dates: October 2005 through December 2008

_Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art_ is co-organized by the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, and by iCi (Independent Curators International), New York, and circulated by iCi. The exhibition is curated by Stephanie Smith. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue are made possible in part by the Smart Family Foundation; the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation; the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation; and iCi Exhibition Partners Kenneth S. Kuchin, and Gerrit and Sydie Lansing. Additional support is provided by the Arts Planning Council, the Environmental Studies Program, and the Green Campus Initiative University of Chicago.
**Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art**

**Traveling Exhibition Project Description**

Sustainable design has the potential to transform everyday life. It is already reshaping the fields of architecture and product design with a new approach that emphasizes the responsible and fair use of resources. It links environmental and social justice, and by doing so it extends past narrowly eco-centered or "green" approaches. International discourse on the subject of sustainability asserts that ecological problems are insoluble without attention to interconnections between environmental, ethical, and economic factors. In recent years, sustainability has been described as an approach to development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.¹

*Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art* explores the ways that sustainable design philosophy resonates with the work of an emerging generation of international artists hailing from cities including Brooklyn, Chicago, Copenhagen, London, San Francisco, San Juan, and Vienna. The artists combine a fresh aesthetic sensibility with a constructively critical approach to the production, dissemination, and display of art. They embed environmental concerns within larger ethical and aesthetic explorations; they are building paths to new forms of practice that go beyond green.

Ranging from the exquisitely practical to the more purely rhetorical, the projects selected by curator Stephanie Smith for presentation in *Beyond Green* make use of the discursive power of art. The artists often work collaboratively and leaven serious social aims with a spirit of play and an off-the-grid sensibility, updating the Bauhaus mantra, “form follows function” or the hybrid nature of Joseph Beuys’s social sculpture. Their works often trigger speculation when presented within art contexts, and in some cases must be animated through usage outside the museum. In fact, some of the projects in *Beyond Green* incorporate do-it-yourself components that can be easily implemented by tour venues or individuals interested in enacting sustainable practices within their own communities.

Environmental issues have been addressed in works of art since at least the 1970s, and many of those earlier works might be retrospectively labeled as sustainable art. However, the projects selected for *Beyond Green* offer a counterpoint to more established and historical forms. The artists included in *Beyond Green* all came of age during the late 1980s and 1990s, and their work draws to varying degrees on two key strands of recent art: the productive overlap between art and design, and the development of new modes of critical art practice. So, where many of their predecessors worked within specific sites or imagined massively-scaled interventions, the artists in *Beyond Green* draw on the visual languages of design and on new relational, process-based modes of art-making to create portable, human-scaled works of art that emphasize the ways that environmental concerns are inextricably linked to other social relationships.
The holistic approach of sustainability seeks to transform the ways we make, use, and dispose of the stuff of everyday life: through attention to objects such as tools, books, clothes, and cars; to structures such as offices, homes, and temporary shelters; and to processes and networks such as recycling systems. These three overlapping areas of concentration will guide the thematic groupings of work in Beyond Green.

The first group of works, loosely characterized as objects, focuses on small-scale objects that incorporate varied strategies of sustainable design. These things function, but do so in ways that range from pragmatic to metaphoric. For instance, the American team of JAM (Jane Palmer and Marianne Fairbanks) equip bags with solar panels to power small-scale electric devices like cell phones, allowing users to step free of the electrical grid while staying connected to communication and entertainment networks. JAM is working to distribute these objects through a small business as well as through do-it-yourself kits; they see these individual objects as part of a larger process of social sculpture. Another example, the Audio Relay developed by Americans Brennan McGaffey and Temporary Services, consists of a portable case that contains an archive of audio art that can be broadcast within a gallery or out to a neighborhood through a small radio transmitter. Venues are invited to contribute new material to the audio art archive. Powered by solar panels, the Audio Relay can be used anywhere, and can serve as a catalyst for actual and virtual connections among communities of listeners. In both form and function it embodies a nomadic, self-sustaining approach to making and disseminating art. The work of Allora and Calzadilla (Jennifer Allora, American, and Guillermo Calzadilla, Cuban) stretches the boundaries of this section: no actual objects are presented, but rather videos showing ways that the artists have transformed everyday objects for evocative, performative uses that highlight unsustainable practices on the Caribbean island of Vieques, where the U.S. military recently ended exercises that have clearly damaged a paradisal environment. In one, Under Discussion, a young man powers a motorboat—made from an upside down table supposedly once used for negotiations—around the island, a witness and observer to this contested place.

The structures section explores questions of sustainability within the built environment of contemporary cities. Several artists have designed structures that combine visual poetry with innovative strategies to transform low-cost or waste materials into portable dwellings. Although these objects might look at home on the pages of a glossy shelter magazine, they are directed at real social needs. A new artists’ group consisting of Brett Bloom, American; Julio Castro, Mexican; Rikke Luther, Danish; and Cecelia Wendt, Danish, have created a transportable hemispherical cardboard structure made of discarded materials; it is meant to be recycled after the close of the exhibition. This work fits into...
this group’s ongoing search for ways to transform waste into building material, including a new experimental project in which the artists are working with a poor community outside Monterrey, Mexico to build dwellings from concrete and scavenged plastic bottles. Likewise, Michael Rakowitz has created inflatable plastic structures called ParaSITES; these temporary shelters are inflated by recycling warm vented air from large urban buildings. Rakowitz designs each ParaSITE in collaboration with an individual homeless person, and his shelters provide temporary respite and comfort for their users while also calling attention to the bigger problem: the persistence of homelessness and lack of affordable housing. British artist Nils Norman offers a more speculative, even surreal work that combines his interests in the uses of public urban space, utopian strategies for living, and sustainable design. For Beyond Green he has created one of his signature large, brightly colored vinyl murals. This complex landscape depicts structures from “adventure playgrounds”—a type of London playground seen by the artist as a model for effective communal design of urban space, along with renderings for several of his projects in process, ranging from a do-it-yourself graywater filtration system to a “utopian research vehicle,” a caravan that runs on bio-fuels and solar power.

The third thematic grouping focuses on processes and networks derived from daily social situations; these works address sustainability while at the same time throwing standard art practices into relief. People Powered (Kevin Kaempf, American) will present a new work, Transport 1, a shipping crate that unpacks into a display system designed to disseminate d.i.y. strategies that institutions and individuals can adopt to recycle and reuse paint and organic waste. (Venues are invited especially to participate in the paint recycling portion of the project; details available on request.) Kaempf has adopted a small business model for his work as an artist, and uses playful graphics to market his practices. During a residency in Chicago in the summer of 2005, the Austrian activist group WochenKlausur will develop strategies to make and distribute useful new objects from museum waste materials. Their presentation for Beyond Green will include a handbook documenting these processes so that other institutions might adopt them. Actual objects produced as a result of the residency will also be displayed. Two other works will highlight the systems and networks through which materials circulate, which most of us rarely stop to assess. Fruit Stand, a new installation by the urban planning and new-media group Free Soil (Amy Franceschini, American; Nils Rømer, Danish; and Myriel Mycevic, German) calls attention to the varied costs (economic, social, environmental) required to get fruit from farms to urban markets; they also explore interconnections between cities and their surrounding ecosystems. For this new piece, crates will
be recycled into a sculpture that evokes the fruit stands one might find at any corner city market. The work will contain an interactive component to allow visitors access to friendly computer graphics and documentary images that show the elaborate processes that undergird an everyday act of consumption. Finally, a new sculpture by American artist Dan Peterman will be created from materials that have been recycled through several generations of this artist’s projects, having previously been rescued from an organization that collected discarded but still usable materials, which had in turn initially been scavenged from other sources for use in an amateur research laboratory.

Why does any of this matter? Although the term “sustainability” is a relatively new one, the ideas that it embodies are spreading both within and beyond the design field—witness the growing popularity of hybrid-electric cars within the U.S. market, which once seemed irrevocably lost to the SUV. Like so many of the rest of us, the artists included in Beyond Green are trying to sort out what it might mean to live and work in sustainable ways. As a result, although the works presented in this exhibition include experimental forms that stretch traditional boundaries of art, their engagement with pressing social issues should undermine any assumption that contemporary art is necessarily hermetic.

Each artist or artists’ group is represented by one or two major works; in some cases, related drawings, models, or photographs will amplify visitors’ understandings of the artists’ practices. The exhibition will include both large and small-scale works, interactive projects, and when possible, a resource area with books and a computer work station devoted to bookmarked web sites providing information on topics pertaining to contemporary art and sustainable design.

The exhibition offers strong opportunities for innovative, interdisciplinary educational public programs. Materials developed by the Smart Museum of Art for the Chicago presentation are available as models, including plans for a hands-on, public design workshop to address sustainable design issues in the area around the University of Chicago that could easily be adapted to other sites, and the syllabus for “Contemporary Art and the Environment”, an experimental, interdisciplinary, field-trip based course to be taught by exhibiting artist Nils Norman during a fall 2005 residency at the University of Chicago. Materials for K-12 students, based on the Smart Museum’s highly regarded multi-visit school programs, will also be available.

Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art is co-organized by the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago and iCI (Independent Curators International), New York, and circulated by iCI. The exhibition is curated by Stephanie Smith. The exhibition, tour, and catalogue are made possible, in part, by the Smart Family Foundation; the Arts Planning Council, University of Chicago; and The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation. Additional support is provided by iCI Exhibition Patrons, Gerrit and Sydie Lansing, and Ken Kuchin and Bruce Anderson.

1As defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987
About the guest curator, Stephanie Smith:
As curator in charge of contemporary art at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art, Stephanie Smith has organized a series of exhibitions on socially engaged and critical practices, all of which have resulted in major new commissions. These include Dawoud Bey: The Chicago Project in Collaboration with Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister (2003), Critical Mass (2002), and Ecologies: Mark Dion, Peter Fend, Dan Peterman (2000). Other key exhibitions include Illuminations: Sculpting with Light (2004, Smart Museum), Hiroshi Sugimoto: Sea of Buddha (2003, Smart Museum), Gary Hill: Reflex Chamber (1998, Rice University Art Gallery) and Sophie Calle: Romances (1994, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston). Ms. Smith has written widely on contemporary art, most recently on the place of artists within research universities. Several of her recent projects have explored the intersection of art and sustainability: a session at the 2005 College Art Association conference, a text for the contemporary art journal Parkett, and the recently launched research project, Smart Exhibition Design, which seeks to develop and disseminate a set of best practices for sustainable exhibition design. Ms. Smith previously served as Assistant Curator at the Rice University Art Gallery and Curatorial Assistant at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

About the exhibition catalogue:
The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated 160-page book, distributed by University of Chicago press. It will include a foreword by Anthony Hirschel, director of the Smart Museum of Art, and Judith Richards, executive director of ICI; essays by curator Stephanie Smith and design historian Victor Margolin; interviews and statements from exhibiting artists, and information on each of the artists and their works.

Artists in the exhibition:
Allora & Calzadilla
Free Soil (Amy Franceschini, Myriel Milicevic, Nis Rømer)
JAM (Jane Palmer and Marianne Fairbanks)
Learning Group (Brett Bloom, Julio Castro, Rikke Luther, and Cecelia Wendt)
Brennan McGaffey with Temporary Services (Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julin, Marc Fischer)
Nils Norman
Marjetica Potrč
People Powered
Dan Peterman
Michael Rakowitz
Frances Whitehead
WochenKlausur
Andrea Zittel

Basic facts:
Participation fee: $12,000 for 10 weeks, plus incoming shipping (Institutions outside the continental United States must also pay customs fees as well as outgoing shipping charges to the U.S. border.)
Number of artists or artist groups: 13
Number of works: 23
Space required: approximately 3,500 to 4,000 square feet
Tour dates: October 2005 through December 2007

Wall texts, press, and education materials will be provided. Ten complimentary catalogues are provided; additional copies are available at 40% of retail price.

Celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2005, ICI is a dynamic non-profit organization committed to enhancing the understanding and appreciation of contemporary art through its innovative traveling exhibitions and publications. ICI brings challenging artworks to a wide range of museums, giving diverse audiences in the United States and abroad the opportunity to experience new art.