

ARTFORUM

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“The University of Trash”

SCULPTURECENTER

Envisaged as a site of alternative pedagogy, *The University of Trash*, 2009, was a collaborative project that took place over three months this past summer. Organized by New York-based artist Michael Cataldi and British artist-activist Nils Norman, it posited DIY design and urban social activism (e.g., squatting) as factors influencing the emergence—and, increasingly, the adoption as policy—of progressive urban and environmental politics. Against the backdrop of hyper-development and gentrification, Cataldi and Norman invoked a counter-cultural ethos to develop an authentically public (i.e., free and open) educational model that generated tactical, community-responsive engagements with contemporary urbanity.

Parked at one end of SculptureCenter's outdoor courtyard, an old red ambulance—a contribution to the project by artist Max Goldfarb—served as a radio transmitter, broadcasting events organized on-site by groups such as the radio-based art collaborative neuroTransmitter and the Center for Urban Pedagogy, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit focusing on citywide educational projects. Within SculptureCenter's main space, the environment suggested a postsculptural or postinstallation anti-aesthetics, characterized by the interpenetration of the formal and informal, the reductive and the chaotic. Casual, open-ended networks of deconstructed rooms (often fabricated from recycled materials) housed leaflets, videos, and other informational materials about alternatively minded grassroots organizations and events. Along with some graffiti-like tags and mural-like imagery on the walls, there was a large blackboard, for “notes,” which was, on the day I visited, a palimpsest of mainly indecipherable writings. Nearby, a number of calendars were available for people to propose courses and events for what was dubbed “The Free Skool.” Throughout the duration of their temporary subaltern university, the artists themselves also programmed a series of workshops and discussions. *The University of Trash* thus functioned as a kind of neo-constructivist assemblage of collectives and alternative educational initiatives.

Several events were staged in a replica of the original Tompkins Square Park band shell (removed when the park was renovated in 1991), here adorned with a mural by Justseeds/Visual Resistance Artists' Cooperative. This structure strategically invoked the historical tensions surrounding urban development, gentrification, homelessness, and affordable housing that have often coalesced around Tompkins Square Park, notably during the 1988 riots that followed the city's attempt to clear the park of homeless people.

In the center of the exhibition space, a number of compressed geometric agglomerations of paper and cardboard formed a series of stacked “Living Cubes” developed by “The Skool of Refuse and Appropriation,” a project involving students from the alternative high school program City-as-School. The students took their cue from James Hennessey and Victor Papanek's 1972 book *Nomadic Furniture: D-I-Y Projects that are Lightweight and Light on the Environment*, which has historically provided a blueprint for strategies of transitory urban emplacement. Serving not only as a catalyst for the designing of temporary functional spaces, recycling here became an emblem of the struggle to reclaim disused—and misused—urban space. In a kind of dilapidated or deconstructed squatterlike office area across from the “Living Cubes,” “House Magic: Bureau of Foreign Correspondence” was installed—referred to in the press release as “a working research office dedicated to squatted social center movements throughout Europe, containing images, documents, and videos collected by Alan Moore and members of ABC No Rio visual arts collective in New York.”

The University of Trash set out to test counterhegemonic educational processes and activate new kinds of social participation, as well



as to function as a platform for a broader ideological defense of what social theorist David Harvey has called the “right to the city.” Yet the playful and somewhat anarchic environment encapsulated a mild contradiction: For all its forsaking of the hierarchies of art in the service of multiple collaborators and participants, *The University of Trash* was ultimately signed (and institutionally codified) by the artistic co-authorship of Cataldi and Norman. This points to the ambiguities and complexities of collaborative bottom-up/top-down working processes. And doesn't such a project still posit the art institution as a nexus of postenlightenment knowledge production, even though the artists were arguing for a radically decentralized politics of collaborative, participatory power?

Not so ironically, next to SculptureCenter, the ghosts of gentrification haunt this Long Island City neighborhood, even in a recession: A glassy new condo building has gone up, with the following advert: PREMIERE CONDOS—STIMULUS PRICING FROM \$350,000. The old battle lines are still drawn.

—Joshua Decter