

Art in America

April 2007



Dan Peterman: Pigsty/Latrine, 2006 wood and polyurethane, 123 1/2 x 145 x 177 inches; at Andrea Rosen Gallery

Dan Peterman at Andrea Rosen

“Round Trip,” as Dan Peterman titled his show, offered a lively tour of some scattered positions in the domain of socially oriented, environmentally conscious art, to which he has a long-standing commitment. Glowing warmly at the show’s entry was *Beacon* (all works 2006), an early 20th century cast-iron and ceramic sewer trap set on end; a powerful autumn-spectrum greenhouse lamp placed inside turned the rusty pipe parts into a genial lighthouse. All else tended toward the coolly conceptual. The more prepossessing works included *Love Podium*, made of reprocessed plastic in a shadowy shade of gray, its simple planked platform supporting a face-to-face pair of full-scale lecterns. This perfectly good proposal for public dialogue, which recalls Siah Armajani’s similar (if considerably more elaborated) furniture for civic speech, was joined in the gallery’s main room by *Pigsty/ Latrine*. A substantial structure made of coated wood, it derives, press materials (and gallery staff) helped explain, from a small ceramic funerary object of the Han dynasty. This object represents a very old-fashioned model of nutrient conservation, in which two latrines are situated on platforms attached to adjacent walls of a pigsty, the human waste being of use (don’t ask) to the resident swine. In the Han original, visible on a museum Web site provided by the exhibition’s check-

list, the interspecies 100 is shown with happy little porkers lolling contentedly in the central yard. Peterman’s (unoccupied) version is a skeleton built to usable scale, with wooden studs framing the walls. The conversation in the gallery between the pigsty and the paired podiums, each themselves figures of reciprocity, established the exhibition’s basic argument, which can be summarized as the imperative to use cultural space in the interests of eco-aware cooperation. Ancillary work lining the walls expanded on the theme. Two big banners reproduce, at greatly enlarged scale, the plane tickets from Peterman’s 2004 round trip (to London from Chicago) to attend an ecology symposium; the banners are called, ruefully, *My Sky* (carbon footprint). Arranged like a frieze was a series of aluminum casts made by pressing various mundane objects—a life jacket, a handsaw, a pair of shears, a banjo—into dirt and pouring recycled aluminum into the impressions: instant relics, they suggest junk art as a mechanism of recycling. Most cryptic was a smallish C-print alone on a wall, showing a single sawed-off tree stump, tightly framed, with a rim of ordinary, somehow urban-looking soil around it. Called *Marking a Point in Time*, this image would tell an arborist that the tree was weakened by illness (it has a telltale X-shaped fault at its heart); insiders would know it as a tree that grew in Chicago (where Peterman lives) and was felled by a storm. To the uninitiated, it offers itself as a semaphore of termination—a concise image of nature come to a full stop.

—Nancy Princenthal

MODERN PAINTERS

December 2006 · January 2007

REVIEWS



BERLIN

DAN PETERMAN

GALERIE KLOSTERFELDE

Since the late 1980s alternative sources of energy and recycling have been at the center of Dan Peterman's artistic practice, and these themes surfaced again in his recent work. What is new for the artist is a pessimistic view regarding today's environmental concerns. In place of the projects that Peterman used to present in the 1990s, like flooring and storage systems made of discarded

plastic, here he showed smaller pieces that are first and foremost aesthetic as opposed to functional. Paradigmatic of this shift is *Beyond Chance and Skill* (2006): discarded duct tape and paper are recycled into miniature soccer balls. These lie on a piece of AstroTurf, which in turn was recycled from an installation by the artist Martin Kippenberger. It would appear that, in the age of neoliberal globalization, ecology has a chance only on the playing field of art.

- RAIMAR STANGE

TRANSLATED FROM GERMAN BY EMILY PEERS MEARS

Art in America

MARCH 2005



CHICAGO

Dan Peterman at the MCA

Dan Peterman's well-known investigations of recycling systems and material waste were given their just due in "Plastic Economies," the first major U.S. survey of this Chicago-based artist. Employing a practice that is highly localized to address environmental issues of global magnitude, Peterman has crafted a unique vision and esthetic centered on alternative processes of use and reuse. Included here were selected works from the late 1980s to the present, as well as four new installations created specifically for this exhibition. Peterman's early interest in readymades, debris and indigenous plant life was represented by several small objects, many displayed as artifacts from or accessories to larger projects.

Woodlawn Blend (1988) is a stack of steel cans containing roasted chicory root harvested from a local weed found close to the artist's studio, housed (until 2001, when it was destroyed by fire) within a recycling center near Woodlawn, one of the city's poorest communities. Discarded shopping carts refashioned into chairs and a pasta cutter made from a lowly bottle cap impart the kind of humor one sometimes finds in Tom Friedman's work; more significantly, they share affinities with the socially committed practices of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Krzysztof Wodiczko.

Digital proposal for Dan Peterman's bike shed in Standard Kiosk (Chicago), 2004; at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Computer rendition Chuck Seen.

The pasta cutter was also an element in the installation *Recent Recipes* (2004), a makeshift cottage industry, in which packaged foods (ACNR apple filling, RU Foods (ACNR apple filling, RU Fondant icing) and pasta cut from the bottle cap were arranged neatly on tables and stacked on shelves, alongside white jackets and plastic slippers commonly worn by food industry workers. Here, and in *Excerpts from the Universal Lab* (good humor), 2004, Peterman presented alternative economic models that critique capitalist consumerism while paying homage to grassroots production. In *Universal Lab*, a modified ice-cream truck sat at the center of a sprawling accumulation of found objects and used lab equipment in this remake of a now-defunct research facility created in the 1960s by the University of Chicago to repurpose outmoded scientific materials.

In Peterman's work, the environmental and economic intersect, making visible the ethics of social responsibility. These issues were most evident in *Ground Cover* (1995), a floor made from reprocessed post-consumer plastics, and *Villa Deponie* (2002), a shelter constructed from plywood covered with recycled closed-cell foam; in both, the artist transformed domestic waste into objects for collective use. Altered steel waste receptacles formed the structural

foundation of Standard Kiosk (Chicago), 2004, three temporary publicly sited huts (one a bike station on the MCA's front plaza, and two community centers for culture and health in the neighborhood of Humboldt Park).

Despite the interactive nature of the Kiosk project and the urgency of the issues a dressed, there was something staid about this exhibition as a whole. Opportunities for public dialogue about it were not provided on site, and the open criticality so important to Peterman's interventionist strategy seemed somewhat subsumed by the museum's institutional authority. Central, however, was the ambiguous space Peterman's work occupies, one that allows for political provocation even in its most subtle form.

-Susan Snodgrass



***Temporary Services
2004***

Downtime at the Experimental Station



***A conversation with
Dan Peterman***

by Dan S. Wang



The walls that remained intact after the fire that destroyed the Building at 6100 S. Blackstone in the Spring of 2001.



Dan Peterman's studio after the fire.

Downtime at the Experimental Station

At the corner of 61st and Blackstone, in the South Side neighborhood of Woodlawn, sits a trapezoidal brick structure known to many simply as “the Building.” The artist Dan Peterman acquired it in 1996 from the Resource Center, a local recycling concern whose philosopher-founder, Ken Dunn, has long tested ideas about interconnected economies and ecologies. The Resource Center had operated out of the Building since the late 1960s. Before that it was occupied by a small company called Flood Engineering. Now, nearly eighteen months after a catastrophic fire in the spring of 2001, it sits empty and roofless, waiting to be rehabbed and reoccupied.

At the time of the fire the interior was a honeycomb of oddly angled spaces, subdivided rooms of differing shape and ceiling height, and big garage-like inside/outside areas. The Building housed Peterman’s workspace, the offices of the cultural criticism journal *The Baffler*, Wong Lee’s auto repair, Big Fish Furniture, and Blackstone Bicycle Works. Other spaces were used for staging temporary projects and exhibitions, storing surplus material of all kinds, and hosting group gatherings.

I first stumbled upon the Building not long after Peterman took ownership. I remember it being a junk-hippie kind of place with an outward appearance that could pass for a sleepy corner of Eugene, Oregon, or Burlington, Vermont. The ramshackle structure, the three rusty VW microbuses parked along the curb, and the overflowing community gardens adjacent to the Building made for such a vibe. But instead of fresh country air, you got the mixed scents of the city. Instead of folk dancing, you had the neighborhood kids freestyling as they walked by. And instead of hissy Dead tapes laying around, you had *The Baffler*’s Tom Frank riffing on the Deadhead imprint on the ideology of the New Economy. I liked the symbolism: various small-scale enterprises gathered under one roof, each of which in its own way updated, critiqued, and advanced the validity of projects rooted in earlier countercultural activity. And doing it there, in the shadows of the University and on the edge of the impoverished Woodlawn neighborhood, as if to say that no progressive cultural project would succeed without everyone, no matter their race or class, getting a chance to take part.

Repairing the Building should have been a pretty straightforward process. After all, Peterman owns it and the lot it sits on. But several factors



Almost all back issues of The Baffler were lost in the fire.

complicated the process immensely. A couple years before the fire, the Chicago Public Schools had tried to take the property by eminent domain to expand Carnegie Elementary School next door. After intense negotiations, Peterman struck a deal with the school board in 2000, resulting in a net loss of twenty percent of his land. Although Peterman was able to keep the Building, the negotiations hinted at the gulf separating community members who recognized the intrinsic value of the Building and those who only saw it as an obstacle to conventional real estate development. That disconnect was bound to reassert itself, as real estate speculation finally reached the northern end of Woodlawn after decades of economic neglect. For Peterman and the group of people involved with the Building, the fire was catastrophic. For developers and those City agencies representing their interests, it was the signal to move in and settle this untamed plot, and maybe even get a good bargain out of it.

Immediately following the fire, Peterman and his Building cohorts organized an emergency campaign to board up and fence off the Building. Peterman quickly hired structural engineers and architects and lawyers to save the Building and its contents from demolition. They even organized round-the-clock guard duty by volunteers. In order to derail the forces of “fast-track” demolition, Peterman used all resources available, even leveraging his accumulated prestige as an internationally acclaimed artist. Along with visible local support and quick legal action, letters of backing from around the global world of contemporary art helped to preserve the damaged Building from the wrecking ball.

The structure, though devastated and eventually gutted on the interior, still stands in the form of its outer brick walls. They survived the fire solidly, and in fact became the basis for the legal victory that now allows for the rehabbing to proceed. The Building had been grandfathered as a non-conforming structure on a lot that was re-zoned as residential. That is, the Building would maintain its status as a commercial and light industrial site despite the new zoning, but only under one condition: Its original walls must maintain their integrity. If the walls came down, or were deemed unfit for rehabbing, a new non-residential structure could not be built on the site.

Even after the Building’s occupants moved to their respective temporary quarters, and nothing remained of either the interior or roof, the walls remained functional, standing firm against bureaucratic machinations. It was fitting, then, to sit with Dan Peterman in the shade of the gardens that spread along the Building’s north wall, and talk about the Building’s past and future, as he awaits the final construction permits.

DAN S. WANG: Well, let me first outline some of the issues I'd like to hear you talk about. Apart from the bureaucratic hassles of getting the permits, the most timely issue is your deliberate effort to institutionalize the Building. What we used to call "61st Street" or "the Building" is being reborn as the Experimental Station. This move to institutionalize (through legal self-definition, formality of governance, etc.) seems to be an important strategic move. It brings up all sorts of questions, however—what institutionalization means, what it offers, and what it might cost.

A second question has to do with how you see the Building and your own work fitting into the art world. I mean, when compared to other spheres of social activity (e.g., business, entertainment, academia) the world of contemporary art presents itself as a sphere of exceptionally wide-ranging possibility, and it is. But at the same time it can be extremely elitist.

And, finally, I am curious about how you see both the most recent and the future incarnation of the Building fitting in with its own history—the Building as a site for environmental initiatives, social experiments from the Sixties and Seventies. What lessons have been learned, and what traditions you'd like to see be continued—those kinds of ideas. Hopefully we can touch on all of these issues in one way or another over the next hour.

DAN PETERMAN: I think you could reformulate the ideas you've just mentioned into a nice article about what's been going on here. All of the issues mentioned are relevant. And basically, to over-summarize, the one was about the institutional forms, the other question about managing it in relation to the art world, and then the question of managing the hippie complex....

WANG: Right, right.

PETERMAN: These are all things that I've thought a lot about, things that percolated through my brain as I got more and more involved in this site. And they all remain open and evolving.

WANG: People seldom seem committed to staying in a particular situation over time. The modern-day economy demands that they move around a lot, and even people who have both the ecological consciousness and the luxury of staying put often don't. Most of my adult life has been like that. People go to a farm and apprentice for two or three seasons, and then leave to do something else. Maybe you've seen some issues or problems emerge because you've been in one place for a number of years now.

PETERMAN: I can't say that I brought all my ideas and strategies to this situation, and then simply fleshed them out here. It was a very open and

exploratory process, and that takes time. A lot of obvious things about the Building appealed to me when I first got involved in it. While I was a student at the University of Chicago, the building was still operating as a recycling center and was known as a cheap place to browse for almost anything. I immediately took a liking to it and over time came to better understand how it had come into existence. It was a chaotic but materially rich setting, partly because of the years of recycling related activities and a great reluctance to throw things away, and partly due to many small scale alternative ventures. Most of the ventures, including book and clothing exchanges, a bakery, gardens, and a bikeshop had run out of energy. Their physical remains were still more or less there, and embedded with a rich social history.

It was a window into a period of time that had faded away most everywhere except in Christiania, outside of Copenhagen, and that really attracted me to it.¹ The activities associated with the Building definitely were rooted in Sixties counterculture, and the environmental aspect was part of it, but there were other dimensions as well. Many of the people who organized those activities were still around and available when I got here, and became my friends and colleagues. So being here allowed me to unpack a period of time that was really interesting to me, and to explore social structures along with environmental and artistic strategies.

There is room for thinking about how you can act in a culture and not have to just accept the way things are. Ken Dunn and the other Resource Center people were saying there are some really neat and different ideas out there—what if we tried to put them into action? There was something instinctively activist about this situation that drew me here. It was clearly a shoe-string operation. When I came to the Resource Center they were operating probably the largest fleet of beat-up old VW buses anywhere outside of the Third World. And yet they were engaged in a highly reasoned practice of recycling, with a very simple ecological mission, but one that took into account the social complexity across both the University of Chicago and the intensively disinvested neighborhood of Woodlawn, in addition to environmental activism. For example, the Resource Center provided a model of employment for people who had fallen through all other safety nets.

WANG: Well, that's interesting because I think the period just following the blossoming of social experiments in the Sixties has been underexamined in this respect—it seems as if that flowering was followed by a period of compartmentalization of issues, or of a professionalization of activism. Throughout the Seventies it seems there was a great re-ordering and subdividing of the many progressive impulses and movements that blew wide open just a few years earlier. What you're saying is that you thought it was somehow important to go back to those original moments when people

didn't make distinctions about what is an "environmental" issue versus a "social" issue. It was all just kind of a general experiment with something different.

PETERMAN: Yes. I felt an attraction to a counterculture which brought all kinds of things together, from rigorous academic directions to "feel-good," "do-it-in-your-garden" sentiments. There was a whole range of approaches that somehow coexisted. There also were dynamics that were a bit camouflaged but very problematic in the sense of being hard to change or resist. It was hard to assert order within that kind of formlessness, to do anything except let it be, let everybody get along—just like in all the cliches. There was a kind of friction between individualistic tendencies and collective ones.

WANG: Well, we can now see that certain hippie cliches were embedded with their own forms of authority, too.

PETERMAN: Right. Many of those cliches or truisms or values also at a certain point lead to the demise of structures that require deeper levels of commitment. But at the same time, you don't want to trash them and leap into the known models of authority and structure just to get something done. I've been trying to stay mindful of wildly utopian projects—to look for ways to move into those projects without abandoning yourself to blind optimism, and still not walk away from it as an impossible task. I'm interested in finding ways to float propositions that can be very utopian. Beginning with simple exchanges of things. The bike shop is a good example of trying to build a small economy. The shop provides tools, resources, positive social contacts between adults and young people, a safe place, and job training for kids who are sorely lacking constructive things to do—and it's fueled by old bikes donated from apartment building basements. So that kind of basic economy can become a really complex sort of thing—it is wildly utopian in terms of it gathering all the loose ends of society and then getting the most you possibly can out of it all.

WANG: Yeah, you could say that's really utopian, but the term begins to lose meaning once you get into the practical details. Because what you're describing comes down to constantly reevaluating what's going on, which is really difficult and demanding. It's something most people can't do.

PETERMAN: You always have slippage and you always have leakage. And so you do have to stay on top of things, but that process becomes the goal, rather than achieving a perfect state where everything holds together perpetually. You continually make minute decisions that either shift towards

helping to stabilize the situation in one way or another, or destabilize and diffuse it. Obviously, right now with the bike shop in their second season working out of truck trailers as a result of the fire, there are an overwhelming number of forces that are diffusing the situation. The kids don't participate in the same way, and the staffers have different obligations. Security is a different issue. Everything is up in the air, and we're just kind of hanging on. But we have a lot of experience and ideas about how getting back into the shop will give us the opportunity to really make some big steps forward, and to make it really exciting again. But it is the process that leads it, and that's the most fascinating thing for the people who are centrally involved.

WANG: All groups or enterprises go through transitional periods. This seems like a particularly interesting case precisely because each of the participant cells' primary activity is so different. During this time of being upset out of their customary spaces, they've each had to find their own ways to continue what they do. Each one of them seems to be exposing new sets of needs, or clarifying what it is that they need to have in order to operate with stability.

PETERMAN: And at the same time everybody recognizes that we're in provisional circumstances. We want to get back in here, we want to have the complexity of operation that the Building formerly had. Nobody is getting set up to work this way indefinitely. Many of the participating groups had opportunities to integrate somewhere else, or to say this thing has blown up and gone away. In fact, certain well-meaning people in high positions offered that as a way to help us get through the fire—to incorporate us elsewhere separately. Of course, that means the Building, the site, the history all go away. And that's something to which, without exception, we've all resisted. We'd much rather be camped out in a trailer waiting for the day we reformulate. I think I speak for everybody because we all have that awareness. Nobody is attracted to the idea of getting the real estate section of the newspaper and shopping for studio space or office space. Because we all know that routine. The Baffler did that for years, trying to find a place for their publishing operation, and they never found it.

WANG: How much were these kinds of things talked about?

PETERMAN: After the fire?

WANG: Even before the fire. I got the story once from (publisher) Greg Lane about how The Baffler ended up here, and it sounded like more or less an accidental thing.



Renowned VW mechanic and three-decade tenant of the Building; Wong Lee in the doorway of the truck trailer that housed his business after the fire.

PETERMAN: It was a word of mouth accident within the neighborhood—somebody heard about something and followed up on it. Most of the activities here have come about similarly.

WANG: So was there a point at which people started to understand that there was something really interesting going on here that they didn't expect? Or a realization that the act of locating their activity here was beginning to affect everybody else's work?

PETERMAN: Yeah, I think the realization happened pretty quickly, without there being a single moment when it happened for everybody. There were many gradual events. Bike shop events that people would wander over for. And as you know we cooked a lot of food and had a lot of meals. It was for most people a better way of getting fed at the end of the day than having to go home, run to the store, and cook for themselves. Here was a situation that was not forced, it wasn't a club—there was nothing demanding that it happen. But why not? If somebody cooked a big batch of pasta, another person runs for beer, someone else gets a grill going—we sort of fell into a routine like that. And it wasn't only for tenants. There were more and more people with different relations to the Building, like the gardeners and Mr. Wong's customers. Then of course there were the bike shop cookouts, road rallies, and art events, and so forth, which also brought people in.

WANG: So even if there was no one identifiable moment, you could definitely say at this point—through different writings, through interviews and discussions like this one—from a number of different angles it has been confirmed that something was going on here that was different and notable.²

PETERMAN: Yes. It hit a critical mass, there's no doubt.

WANG: So that brings up the question: how are you going to manage that recognition? There's now another layer, another risk, yet another possibility of this project becoming what everybody would expect it to be, to fit it into a known category.

PETERMAN: It is interesting and complicated. Because clearly, not only do the participants have to guard against those tendencies within themselves, but the City is pushing everything through a filtering process in a way I never would have anticipated. Right now huge tracts of the city are being scrutinized for everything. The City seems to have license right now to say this doesn't belong or that does belong. In a very unsophisticated, unimaginative way, city bureaucrats are making decisions about what will be allowed to

exist or survive.

WANG: Are you talking about...

PETERMAN: I'm talking about the lakefront, for example. They're encasing it in concrete. And the Promontory Point controversy.³ I'm talking about the way we were handled through the negotiations to provide land for the school expansion. I'm talking about the difficulty of that process, and then compounded by a factor of ten, the difficulties following the fire. It was clear that the mindset and entire attitude was "here's the chance, this thing doesn't belong, make it go." I'm talking about the eviction of the Creative Reuse Warehouse (another offshoot of the Resource Center) by continued University of Illinois-Chicago expansion. On a bigger scale, look at what's happening to public housing in the city.⁴ There are powerful mechanisms in place, deeply entrenched. Although at times it's a matter of a specific agenda, I think it's generally an impersonal institutional filtering process through which everything gets pushed. Some things survive because there is already a preexisting category for them. The things that don't filter through cleanly end up in building court or the zoning office, in legal controversy of one kind or another, stressed by legal costs, stressed by any kind of interaction with the City. These sorts of costs—of dealing with City bureaucrats "just doing their jobs"—are never taken into account.

WANG: Over the past couple of decades there have been efforts to create different paths for property ownership, definition, and control. Like urban community land trusts. By now they are a well-defined way of removing land from the speculative market. A lot of those forces that you're talking about are geared towards optimizing that speculative market. [A land trust is a non-profit body which acquires land through purchase and/or donation for the purposes of protecting sites of historic, natural, or local value from development.]

PETERMAN: I studied land trusts for a while, and there was a period during which I was very interested in that model. I brought that information with me when I came to the Building. Part of my questioning of the site and of acquiring it from the Resource Center, was figuring out to what extent it needed to be reinvented, and what model of ownership would allow for it to grow in an exploratory way. To a great extent, my own commitment to the Building has been secured by the value of the property itself. It would have been difficult for me to do what I've been doing either as an underpaid employee of a non-profit or just as a volunteer. I'm not sure a land trust strategy would have worked that well—certainly not while juggling a career, and kids, and

family. I've taken a considerable financial risk, but because I control the property itself there is at least some compensation for the huge amounts of time and energy I've invested. If it all goes to pot there's at least a settlement to be had—something to carry into future projects.

WANG: I can see the land trust model tracking the project in an expected direction, to have it “serve the public” in a lowest common denominator kind of way. So owning the property has allowed you to leverage it, to do something much more risky. You've kept it in the speculative market to have some consolation security if the experiments should fail. Of course, that means that developers will keep it in their sights, as well.

PETERMAN: In this city I now believe that everything remains “in the sights”. I no longer have confidence in an urban land trust model as a magic solution here. But keeping it as private property in a speculative market has allowed me to leverage my own time and my own activity in a way I just couldn't rationally do otherwise. It would be insane, or suicidal in a way that would affect my family. But, yeah, leverage is the right word. Owning it has allowed me to leverage it more dramatically into what I want it to become, which ultimately is a more open, productive project.

As we institutionalize the Building, in order to survive the bureaucratic filtering process, we're trying to keep that balance in mind. Essentially, I'm trying to define things here as an incubator model. We want to create a not-for-profit called the Experimental Station that will take over full operation of the site. Ownership will become a more distant issue for extended periods, revisited every five or ten years. The private ownership model will be in place, but the full operation of the site is given over to the not-for-profit. That balance is going to hopefully allow the Experimental Station sufficient stability and free play.

WANG: And you're aware that it may turn into something that doesn't fit with the possibilities you imagined.

PETERMAN: That's true. Initially, we'd like for it to be as open as possible. As an incubator, it's going to be an engine for taking interesting ideas and interesting projects whether they're arts based, or entrepreneurial, or whatever, and try to create an interesting local ecology within the building, within this chunk of land. The idea is to foster those little projects and figure out how to achieve the critical mass that we were talking about before—a threshold at which diverse projects begin to reinforce each other in unexpected ways and new ideas get embraced. So hopefully the Experimental Station becomes a structure that reinvents itself by continually bringing in new ideas.

That's always going to influence the structuring principle. The Experimental Station will at that point have a board, and some ongoing debate about how authority is managed... but hopefully it's an open and adaptable thing.

WANG: Inevitably the Experimental Station itself, once institutionalized in that way, can become its own filtering mechanism.

PETERMAN: Right. But it can be a filter to help identify and sustain certain kinds of initiatives—as opposed to a filter that serves to weed out and eliminate things.

WANG: I can imagine that once there's some level of formality to the enterprise, others from outside of it will start to recognize it as a potential resource in ways that the Building was not. It took a discerning eye to recognize the Building as a resource: You had to see beyond the normal stuff, to see it as a righteous experiment without any external entity conferring legitimacy. It seemed to exist as a place for cultural work largely unregulated by established worlds, and belonged mostly to a social world of its own making. It will have a higher profile in the future.

PETERMAN: Trying to create the institution that will stay open in one direction but also provide an identity and a name, a legal structure, and hopefully some kind of an economic balance—to be sure, it's a defensive posture. But it needs to hold its ground, or we don't have a point to fight from. Just the idea of giving it a name, to me, is disappointing. The Building's been called “the wood shop,” “the bike shop,” “the gardens”... by the City, by the University, by all different people. It was like the story of the blind men and the elephant—whatever part of the elephant they grabbed, that's what they would call it. There's something really lovely about that. To let it define itself from multiple starting points. Unfortunately, that's an impossible luxury right now. When you're sitting in zoning court, in front of a judge, that's not the time to become the Zen master who says it is what you believe it is. As much fun as that would be, they would say, “It's ours, that's what we want it to be!”

The Building was a place where things happened, but weren't forced to. Now we are being forced. We cashed in all kinds of built-up credit to save this place. We were, for the most part, flying under the radar before the fire, but after the fire we had to openly declare ourselves, and use all of the connections we have, all the strength of our reputations. Each one of us—my reputation as an international artist, The Baffler's reputation, the bike shop's reputation. We can't just put those things away now. It's a question of disappearance, of being on the map or not. Retreating into our apartments and garages, giving up the space, giving up the direct connections of history and

memory that go back in time to the Sixties and early Seventies—giving up the whole opportunity for people to wander in and say “what is this place?” Nobody wanted to let that happen. I consider the social history of the site a valuable resource worth preserving.

WANG: Institutionalization can be an effective way to protect our gains. But it also opens the door to bureaucratization. That’s the downside of institutionalization. In the worst cases—which aren’t uncommon—groups of people formerly responsible to each other become irresponsible, and allow one, some, or all to be treated in disrespectful or even degrading ways, all in the name of the institution. This happens even when the individuals involved before and after the moment of institutionalization are the same. So one question is, then, how to establish ongoing enterprises with the lifespans and reproductive capabilities of institutions, but without all the bureaucratization? Because there’s a degree of open-endedness built right into the name, would it be accurate to say that you imagine the Experimental Station to be an experiment in institutionalization itself?

PETERMAN: I borrowed the name “Experimental Station,” going back a hundred years, from a reference Frank Lloyd Wright made in a different setting, and I think it suggests a very clear, anchored, Midwestern identity, but also doesn’t exactly spell out what we’re doing. It gives an easy and usable explanation, and it sounds productive, like a concept that’s been developed. But in the end, hopefully, it’s kind of hard to peg down beyond an incubator model. Of course, the question is incubating what? And at that point we’re striving to keep things as open as possible.

Along with questions about land trusts and ownership models is the possibility of a microfoundation, and things are moving in that direction, too. We’ve had several discussions about this kind of model. Rather than the enormous gulf that currently exists between foundations and the projects they fund, why not operate within a stable community of some kind, and have the ability to disburse funds much more directly and much more efficiently. I think the main case for it is one of efficiency. The idea for this comes out of operating the Building for years and being able to adjust rents quickly. For example, if the wood shop came to me and said we’re really having a cash flow crisis, we could say, okay why don’t we just put off the rent for a couple of months and see where you are then. The Baffler continually raised their own rent whenever they had a little bit more money because they realized that they’d been paying a significantly under-market rate. So they voluntarily contributed a little bit more. Those kinds of adjustments happened because everyone had some faith in the way that the building was run—there was no profit siphon and it was all going back into the mechanism.

I began to think about that more and more as an extremely efficient foundation. Based on a single conversation you could make a decision that could impact a small start-up operation pretty significantly. The incubator model, as I've been thinking it through, takes that kind of thing into account, so that it becomes a kind of assisting fiscal agent that can adjust rents, can fundraise for tenants, and can be an active mechanism for cultivating things with a minimum of hassle.

WANG: So this would be an example of cutting down on the bureaucracy that tends to impersonalize the workings of most institutions. It's at once both a more advanced and more literal application of the concept "trust."

PETERMAN: Right. The microfoundation would only work with a personal element, with people knowing each other. Rather than sitting back and issuing occasional grants to people who go through a standard procedure, it's being in much more direct contact, and seeing that, for example, some project clearly needs a new computer—we could simply say here's the money for a computer. The idea is to be in a position to know as quickly as possible that it's time to get something done, to bring it to the next step.

WANG: Well, when you're thinking about the importance of shaping the structure on all of these levels—the social structure, the economic relationships between all of the entities, things like that—what about the space itself? I haven't seen the floor plan for the actual rehab, but what kinds of discussions did you have with the architect when you were thinking about the new walls, and divisions of physical space inside?



Creative use of office chair: The Baffler's temporary office trailer that they have been using since 2001, after a break in.

PETERMAN: We had a lot of good discussions about it. We brought all the tenants in.

WANG: Because the pre-fire building layout was so odd and so irregularly cut-up.

PETERMAN: We're basically looking for maximum flexibility, and there's always been an interest in setting up private space and figuring out how that relates to common space. Privacy is an important component, so there is always the option of participating in a common event, or just going into a niche and staying there. That's been one of the continuing interests—to have well-divided space, but then to really balance common areas. Nearly everyone was involved in the gardens. The bike shop has got a lot of design needs. The Baffler space will be a more conventional kind of office space. And then the kitchen, as I mentioned, has been and will be important. We're designing a big multipurpose space, and a small gallery-like space, truck access, video screening, et cetera—we're trying to get as much versatility as we can into the plans.

WANG: It seemed to me that the pre-fire layout not only facilitated mixing, but even forced it, with the way people had to walk through certain areas in order to get to, say, the bathroom. And there really wasn't a proper front door, so a first time visitor would often end up circling the entire building and looking at it from all sides before knocking on one of the heavy steel doors to get in. Sometimes that could be a small adventure in itself. Were there moments when you were going over a plan or a sketch and just said, wait a minute, this is just far too conventional, or too compartmentalized, or this plan won't facilitate the kind of mixing that we want?

PETERMAN: Yes. We rejected a lot of ideas. And now the plans are vastly simplified. Mainly because of the time we lost dealing with an uncooperative building department, we just need to get a roof on it. So a whole range of interesting possibilities—rooftop gardens with greenhouses, eco-design, self-sustaining energy projects—will have to wait. Those kinds of things we discussed a lot early on, and we've tried to incorporate the possibility of adding them later. That's about the best we can do right now. We just can't afford more delays trying to explain to the City what a deep-well system is.

WANG: Well, that leaves open a lot of architectural possibilities for the future.

PETERMAN: It does. It'll be a very open structure. I can show you plans

sometime.

WANG: Yeah, I'm curious.

PETERMAN: The whole building will be a little bit more streamlined for events. People will arrive at a very regular door, and have access to bathrooms. So it won't be what it was. It can never be as funky as it was, but we just have to get in and see what it turns into.

WANG: Are you yourself looking forward to the involvement of fresh people?

PETERMAN: Yeah. I'm really excited by the Building and what can happen. If the model comes together, even if it's a different one from before then it could really be a good project. It's exciting to have the opportunity to do this. It's really frustrating that it's been so antagonized by City agencies. I would have never anticipated it being...

WANG: That bad?

PETERMAN: Yeah. I mean, after having lived here a long time and not being particularly naïve about it, I didn't know it could be that bad.

WANG: Could we talk a little bit more about how you see the environmental movement, and the ways in which both the Building and your own art activity fit into that sphere? I see in this activity, as a totality, a really interesting critique of what I would call the mainstream or conventional environmental movement. Part of it has to do with the location of the Building itself—in North America you don't find too many environmental initiatives on the edge of inner-city African American neighborhoods.

PETERMAN: It is a little bit difficult for me to articulate, partly because it's just hard for me to summarize how it's perceived from the outside. Obviously, for years I've been working in close relation to committed environmentalists, and working in close proximity to operations like the Resource Center, which has always treated environmental and socioeconomic problems as a single thing. I've had the opportunity to constantly make distinctions between what a good environmental activist would do versus what a committed artist would do, or what an artist-activist would do, or what a kind of sociologically committed political activist would do—to carefully consider all of these versions of actors. Of course it's hard to just nail it down, to say this is what we're doing and what it means to either the



Two architectural design proposals for the Experimental Station.

environmental movement or the art world. In a lot of ways I think it does come back to what you started out talking about, which is returning to a specific place, spending time there, and letting things emerge from there. A kind of critique emerges—one that critically examines the mechanisms that move very quickly through problems that aren't solved by moving quickly through them. Short term expediency or least-resistance pathways are not always the same as the most efficient or productive ones. Or to put it another way, you could collect a lot of information on sustainable living, but if you live sustainably for fifty years, then you've done something entirely different and entirely better.

This project has certainly been influenced by what you might call elements of an ecological consciousness, the appreciation of complexity being one of them. But there are other equally important elements. For example, you might be attracted to something aesthetically, through artistic training and an awareness of pattern, texture, form, etcetera, and those qualities of that thing may move into politics or social relations or some similarly broadened arena of social concern. It's hard to define how this hybrid activity is or should be seen—aesthetic, biological, political—and I'm not particularly interested in making those distinctions. There definitely is a kind of simple biological model that concerns me—one that understands that you need complexity, and you need to pay attention to details, that certain things result just from improving soil quality, for example. The same thing is true within an operation like the bike shop. By putting more tools out, you make for a richer situation. Getting more bikes, getting people with different sets of skills, you create a richer setting for things to start happening. I guess in managing the Building I've intuitively avoided repetition, and instead tried to foster each different little area. So that's something I can either take in an aesthetic dimension or as an environmental principle: By bringing diversity and complexity to a site, you're using it more fully. It becomes more stable as a point of social interaction, and it becomes more attractive.

WANG: To me it seems like a failure more egregious on the part of the environmental movement than even other kinds of sociopolitical movements because, as you're saying, simple biological evidence points toward those conditions of diversity and complexity as fundamentally positive values. The modern environmental movement is supposedly informed by that kind of a consciousness, but then you see this monolithic process, whether you're talking about the organizational structure of environmental groups or the focus of environmental issue-oriented campaigns. And maybe you're not addressing your work to the environmental movement or to environmentalists, but it definitely seems like people who are interested in more effective environmental action could certainly take some lessons.

PETERMAN: There are a lot of forces that narrow people down, and narrow agendas down, so that you can put out mailings, so that you can fundraise effectively, and so on. Obviously, there are realities that lead down that path. Part of the sentiment of this place was to allow ourselves to step back and find something that could sustain it—not to become overly dependent on external funding, and therefore not to have to over-specialize, to over-define, to even name what it is that was going on here. To just let it become “61st Street” or “The Building” or another generic name.

WANG: Well, my own experience is the reason I ask this question. I had an early fascination with these kinds of ecological processes, and they really informed the values that I’ve taken into adulthood. For a while I thought that I might find some satisfaction by becoming involved in environmental groups or becoming an environmental activist. Then I was disappointed to see that to become an environmental activist almost means giving up being a part of that complexity, even with regard to other issues and causes. That led me back to art. The art world seems to be one of the few spheres of action that allows for an exploration of ideas, histories, and issues in the kinds of depth that reveals relationships between all different things.

PETERMAN: Right. Well, see those little potted ash trees over there, sitting near the fence? Those are the results of ComEd’s—I don’t know what you’d call it—maybe “blood money.” They got slapped on the wrist for x tens of millions of dollars, which they negotiated to repay by doing so-called environmental projects. So passing out generic city shade trees is their deal. They passed all these out and it just so happened at the end of the day there were seventy-five extra trees. Ken Dunn ended up getting them all because he’s the recycler who saves everything, and the ComEd people didn’t have any interest in the leftovers. They just distributed as many as they could and went home at four o’clock and Ken dropped the rest off here. So we’ve got seventy-five trees here. There’s an obvious critique that you could aim at ComEd, or whoever’s negotiating these kinds of deals. But you can also take a step back into the art world and say, well, okay, these trees now have that much richer a history—they’ve gone through not only their own biological programming, but a whole other kind of economic structure, and they’ve emerged, they’re still living, they’re still in pots, there’s another casual process of them getting planted in the vicinity. They’re being leaked away one at a time in a car trunk here and a car trunk there. I take great satisfaction in the underlying absurdity of it all. Not that it’s crystallized in anything beyond the fact that there those trees are, and I water them every other day. But to have committed myself to the course of action that tries to get ComEd to perform some ridiculous act of retribution like this, and to say that’s what

being an environmentalist is—that's not going to work for me.

Or you look at a place like the Center for Green Technology [the City of Chicago showcase for environmentally responsible practice], and in some ways there are aspects of this Building there, like trying to look at a site ecologically, and trying to invite interesting tenants like the Greencorps, and a solar panels producer. There's the effort to make an interesting community of things, but they're doing it mainly through settlement funding from ComEd. Millions of dollars, funded over the top, everybody's paid, there are more public relations people than there are engineers involved in it. You end up leaving saying it's interesting, but it's just not real.

WANG: You're more ready to identify as an artist than as an environmental activist, and part of that seems to do with your recognition of the importance of representation and symbolism. The Center for Green Technology may be doing some good stuff, but it doesn't have that awareness of itself as a symbol. Because considered as a symbol, it would seem to be a failure, a pay-off.

PETERMAN: Also, I think if you're invested in that kind of community, you end up becoming very cynical. But if you dive into the absurdities and you bring a rich vocabulary of materials, placements, juxtapositions, and textures, then somehow the task changes. I guess environmental activism doesn't really need artists. There are elements of professionalized activism that are useful at times, but it's kind of a bulldog occupation where one has to be focused and go at the same things everyday, one has to be fighting slow or unchanging bureaucracies everyday. In order to process what it all means I feel like I've got to step back into the art world, and there I can let the fuller meaning unfold.

WANG: We were talking about using the structure of private property to leverage or make possible these other kinds of activities. Do you see some parallel between that and the whole construct of selling and collecting in the art world? Because if you're talking about becoming a cynic, there certainly are enough pathways that lead to cynicism in the art world, including selling your work in the art object market. Even though the art can be anything and anything can be the art, there still are questions about who can experience the art, both in terms of making it and encountering it. It seems important to think through those and other kinds of art world dysfunctions, since supporters of the Building have been using the art world as a constructive context for some of the radically democratic things that have happened here, and yet large segments of the art world are anything but.

PETERMAN: Yes, of course the art world has abundant political flaws and

pitfalls, but it also draws people and projects and resources together in ways that just don't exist elsewhere. I benefit to some extent by private collectors, but not to a huge degree. I also benefit from institutions that give jobs to people who are interested in working with me on projects and a lot of things don't have a salable outcome. It can be very dangerous to think of the art world as a place to seek sanctuary, but that world can provide an arena that's willing to flex and stretch, to accommodate new things and different kinds of ideas. And it is an arena that can adjust to different formulations of political, social, historical, or aesthetic interests. I've always found a satisfying range of motivations at work, and a satisfying range of possibilities. I think the art world really has to be approached as a kind of laboratory.

WANG: I suppose it's another case of having to constantly evaluate the different forces at work. And if you bring your values to the art world, rather than looking to the art world for your values, cynicism isn't as much of a danger. Can we end by hearing a few personal thoughts about how the fire has pushed your thinking and your artwork in unexpected directions? I know that you've exhibited some of the insurance claim photos, for example. Are there any really tough decisions you've had to make about your work given the loss of your workspace? Or any surprisingly positive developments? I can certainly say for myself that even though you and I already had been talking on and off for several years about what kinds of projects I could help bring to the building, it was the fire that opened the door wide—so people like me could just show up and say “I'm here to help, what can I do?” I can imagine that for every relationship strained by the fire, there might have been four or five that became much stronger.

PETERMAN: There's no question that some of the relationships in place prior to the fire have deepened because of it, and in surprising ways new ones have emerged. There are many people who were not directly involved but are deeply committed to what this model of activity has to offer—people from very different backgrounds.

The fire combined with the inhospitable stance taken by the City has forced me to adjust priorities. In some ways it has speeded me along in directions I was already traveling. It helped focus and intensify many of the issues I was rubbing up against. My sense of how productive something like the Experimental Station could be has been boosted by a greater sense of urgency in restoring and maintaining it. Along with this comes a much stronger awareness of the external forces, some deliberate and ideologically driven, and others bumbling and bureaucratic, which work against it.

On a more personal level, the fire and all that's followed, has had an enormous impact on me as an artist. I've had to scramble and improvise in

so many different ways. Some kinds of projects can move ahead given my current circumstance while others can't budge until I have a studio again. I'm fortunate to have established myself as an artist with several different strategies for working so I've continued to be somewhat productive. Some things, like the photos you mentioned, have been satisfying extensions of earlier interests. The dialogue about the fire insinuates itself into any discussion about what I do as an artist. It becomes another layer of content. But the story isn't finished yet. It'll take more time for me to really be able to answer that question.



Canning tomatoes grown in the garden.

POSTSCRIPT

In the late spring of 2003 the City of Chicago finally approved the long-sought building permits. The new foundation was laid in early July of that year and Peterman expects some of the original tenants, including The Baffler and Wong Lee's auto repair, to move out of their trailers and back into the Experimental Station by the fall of 2004. At the same time, the Experimental Station as an organizing and funding entity will begin to take shape.

NOTES

Special thanks to “Diamonds” Dave Mulcahey for his editorial assistance.

¹ Christiania was a disused parcel of land that was overtaken in 1970 by Danish activists and countercultural types. It has evolved into something of an autonomous territory of its own, and today continues the experiments in governance and lifestyle started more than thirty years ago.

² See bibliography, especially Thompson and Sholette, Gregory G., "Dangerous Liaisons: Dan Peterman's Universal Lab and the University of Chicago ," in the catalog Dan Peterman: 7 Deadly Sins And Other Stories, pp.70-75.

³ Promontory Point is a lakefront park in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago designed by Prairie School architect Alfred Caldwell. In 2001, the Chicago Park District and the Army Corps of Engineers unveiled plans to destroy the historically significant limestone revetment at 55th Street and replace it with with a concrete and steel structure. The people of the nearby South Side neighborhoods vehemently opposed the project, and a community group has organized to secure the Point’s preservation.

⁴ In 1999 the Chicago Housing Authority initiated a program to revamp the city’s public housing on an epic scale. The plan calls for the demolition of more than 50 high-rise buildings, clearing the way for private development. Because the tens of thousands of former residents lacked any effective advocacy, they face an uncertain future caught between forced relocation and inadequate replacement low-income housing.

More on the Experimental Station and the art of Dan Peterman:

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August 2004: The Experimental Station's interior under construction.

Chicago Tribune

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CHICAGOANS OF THE YEAR: ART

Dan Peterman: *Everything old is art again*

Dan Peterman has been making art for 20 years. Most of it in Chicago. Yet until this year he was better known in Europe than North America and no major publication had appeared on his work in the English language.

Lynne Warren, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, first saw Peterman's work in 1987 at the old Randolph Street Gallery. Several projects with the MCA followed. But a few seasons ago, when Warren considered Chicago-based artists who had arrived in midcareer without benefit of a first-rate museum survey and publication, she thought of Peterman.

"Dan Peterman: Plastic Economies" was accompanied by three slim volumes documenting two decades of his works and projects. Peterman also did a lot of traveling in 2004 -- in the Netherlands, France and Germany -- and for the first time began teaching, at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Clearly, he was bouncing back after a number of years that nearly drove him from the city. In April 2001, his South Side studio was consumed in a fire. Everything but the outer walls came down, and while much of his work was saved -- it had been shipped to his gallery in Berlin -- the fire was nonetheless devastating, as the building housed several other community-based operations that were close to the core of Peterman's art. Recycling is the notion that has motivated most of his pieces.

It is not an end in itself, but a beginning, for Peterman's unusual works -- seats made from shopping carts, plaza furniture created from reused plastic -- mean to direct viewers to spheres beyond the artistic. They seek for us to perceive things in a multiplicity of ways so we find better solutions to make things work.

An enjoyable exhibit. If that sounds dryly conceptual, Peterman's art is not. "Some thought [the exhibition]

would be cerebral," Warren said. "They had no idea they would enjoy it so much. Maybe they shouldn't have, but they kicked the tires and took pokes at the house of recycled shoes, and it was unusual to see so many people [in an exhibition] smiling."

A couple of pieces -- a bike-repair shop and market kiosk, both made from dumpsters -- went into Chicago parks, where they served practical functions, as the operations in Peterman's building once did and, apparently, will again. The year 2004 also brought The Experimental Station, as he is calling the redesigned building at 61st Street and Blackstone Avenue, a lot closer to reopening.

Peterman says: "I hope that in a way [my] work demystifies a willingness to jump into projects to figure things out, push things around, invest in things that are easy to just discard and not think about. It comes out of a pretty close-to-the-earth approach." This was the year Chicagoans had the best opportunity to get closer to this remarkable, socially committed artist.

-Alan Artner

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ARTFORUM

MAY 2004 INTERNATIONAL

CHICAGO

Dan Peterman

MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART

Dan Peterman was engaged in the practice of “adaptive reuse” long before the term came into vogue. Distinct from recycling, reprocessing, and rehabbing, adaptive reuse doesn’t run materials through the consumer mill again. Instead, like the artistic practice of working with found objects, it refers to the alteration of things, often the detritus of industrial and/or commercial activity, into something new that reveals their sources while turning them to another use. When Peterman takes the kind of ubiquitous supermarket shopping cart often appropriated by homeless people and efficiently turns it into a Miesian chair, as he does in *Thank You for Your Patronage: Chairs from Street Carts*, 1989, his gesture seems more rehabilitative than ecological. Slightly absurd but completely functional, there is a poetry of junk here, a salvaging that, ironically, is redemptive of its original material.

This midsize retrospective suggested that Peterman is more rust-colored than green. In his workshop in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago he has immersed himself in the decaying residue of the late industrial revolution, in the dysfunctional junk that litters the urban landscapes of systems made redundant and pathetic in their abandonment. In *Excerpts from the Universal Lab* (good humor), 2004, the artist assembles a *kunstkammer* of scientific rubbish, a collection of thousands of decades-old outmoded materials from the University of Chicago labs. On a large constructed flatbed he has placed the painted cab of a Good Humor truck, surrounding it with an inventoried array of this exhausted scientific flotsam, organizing it by size, shape, material, and function. Pursuing adaptive reuse only insofar as he transforms this glut into art, he investigates the ephemeral nature of knowledge and ; the almost immediate redundancy of most human activity. *Ville Deponie*, 2002, is a



small hut made from recycled sneaker material attached to plywood. The springy dotmatrix sneaker residue ranging from blue to yellow to black to orange and pink makes the hut a pointillist composition, and comfortable to sit inside or walk on, too. This move toward putting the sneaker craze of recent decades to some real use is the kind of thinking that Peterman engages. It is less an effort to light a symbolic candle in the midst of late capitalist waste than a reconsideration of the possible applications of that waste. The gray and taupe benches and planks he began constructing from postconsumer plastic in 1997 are directed toward providing park recreation and communal dance floors, putting waste to work in the service of urban citizenry. In *Standard Kiosk* (Chicago), 2004, Peterman takes the massive trapezoidal metal dumpsters now an omnipresent part of the urban environment, cuts them in half, and pieces them together vertically to form kiosks that serve a variety of uses.

Two are currently installed in Chicago’s Humboldt Park to disseminate health and cultural information; a third in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art serves as a bicycle station. That a trash receptacle could be made capable of regeneration is Peterman’s way of suggesting a kind of adaptive problem-solving that could be more and more a part of our collective future.

-James Yood



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Reclamation Project

Conceptual artist Dan Peterman, MFA'86, explores the fate of objects, the nature of borders, and the trajectory of obsession.

Dan Peterman is, in a phrase the Polish poet Milosz once used to describe himself, "a man of a few streets." Those few streets come together at the space the conceptual artist has cleared in the world in order to do his work, the space that contains his studio and much else besides, a space simply called "61st Street."



Located at the corner of 61st Street and Blackstone Avenue, the structure was originally a parking facility, then an industrial site, and, beginning in the 1970s, the base of operations for a pioneering recycling venture. Under Peterman's stewardship, it has evolved into a rich, intricate weave of neighboring enterprises, initiatives, and projects. In addition to his studio, it contains an auto mechanic's shop, a wood-working shop, a bike shop, and the offices of a magazine and of a community organization. There is also extensive common space, including a courtyard, a kitchen, a rough-hewn gallery area, and, most important, a community garden embracing some 50 individual plots.

61st Street is at once a place where serious work gets done in private spaces behind closed doors and a convivial setting, open to the world, where one intersects with one's friends and neighbors. 61st Street is also the border between worlds. To the north, beyond the Midway, is Hyde Park and its central institution—the University of Chicago. To the south is Woodlawn, until recently among the poorest neighborhoods in the city. There are a number of University outposts south of the Midway—including the studio art program Peterman came to Chicago to attend—but generally members of the University community use the phrase "the other side of the Midway" to refer to the edge of their world.

Peterman has lived along that edge since he first came to Chicago in 1983. As interest in his work has grown in recent years, he has traveled a great deal. Over the last 18 months, he has participated in exhibitions in Berlin, Munich, Gothenberg, Edinburgh, New York, Grenoble, and Basel. This summer he exhibited closer to home as part of a group show at the Smart Museum titled "Ecologies." The particular ecology that nourishes his work is, despite the claims of an international art career, intensely local.

Together with his wife Connie Spreen, PhD'87, a Harper instructor in the College, and their two children, Axel (6) and Sander (4), he lives in an apartment three blocks away from the singular border institution that houses his studio. For weeks at a time, the family's maroon 1984 Volvo station wagon stands, unused, at the curb outside 61st Street. Nothing in Peterman's past experience—he grew up and attended school in rural Wisconsin, earning his B.F.A. from the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire—prepared him for the world he found when he arrived on the South Side to begin his graduate studies at Midway Studios. He immediately set about exploring his new environment. To use one of his favorite verbs, he "rummaged around" in the studio provided by the University, in the curriculum, in the neighborhood. His search for materials for his art-making eventually brought him to a facility operated by an organization called the Resource Center located at 61st and Blackstone. He has been rummaging around there ever since.

Founded in 1969 by Ken Dunn, AM'70, the Resource Center is the city's oldest and largest non-profit recycling operation. A pioneer in developing urban recycling strategies, Dunn fashioned a model for resource recovery that has been widely adopted ("Trash Action," April/91). The essence of this model is a design that pairs poor and affluent neighborhoods. By basing its operations in poor neighborhoods, the Resource Center generates local employment and puts vacant land to productive use. From these bases, trucks go forth to collect recyclables in affluent neighborhoods and to serve the recycling needs of large institutions. Materials are then brought back and processed. The Resource Center also provides buy-back centers for the scavengers who collect bottles and cans in the streets and alleys of the city.

The facility at 61st Street that Peterman wandered into as a graduate student had at one time been the primary Resource Center processing site, but the processing operation had recently been shifted to a larger site further south. The building still served as the base for some Resource Center activities, but it had largely fallen into disuse. It was, Peterman recalls, like an archeological site. There were strata upon strata of materials—discarded objects that had been recovered but not found reuse, materials that had fallen out of the recycling loop and been left behind, the residue of various ventures (a library, a clothes exchange, a bakery, etc.) that had been started then abandoned. The structure was so dense with materials that it had ceased to be usable for much else besides storage.

After earning his M.F.A. in 1986, Peterman went to Ken Dunn and asked him two questions. Could he work for the Resource Center? Yes, replied Dunn, he could have a job, but the Resource Center couldn't afford to pay him minimum wage. Was there any space available that he could use as a studio? Yes, he could use a grossly overstuffed room at the 61st Street facility.

"The Resource Center was unique," Peterman recalls. "It was one of the only entities operating across the border. Nothing else was moving across 61st Street other than the postal service."

Peterman worked as a driver on a collection route. And for a time he manned a buy-back facility to which scavengers-urban hunter-gatherers bearing bottles, cans, and other recyclables-came to exchange the materials they had gathered for cash. He found in the Resource Center more than a job, studio space, and a source of materials. He found a vehicle for exploring the South Side and for pursuing his intuitions as an artist wherever they might lead him.

His work with the Resource Center exposed him to the sheer scale and momentum of the so-called "waste stream," a delicate term for the flood of materials that consumer society has loosed upon the world. Dunn has observed that "waste is a resource in the wrong place." That is an elegant formulation-and a daunting relationship to the material world. When your principles bar you from throwing away anything that could conceivably be reused, the world of recycling can become oppressive, an unending avalanche of stuff.

Peterman's studio is located on the banks of the waste stream that flows through the Resource Center. Working over the years at 61st Street, he has struggled to create and maintain a clearing for work and reflection amid the crush of waste/resources.

He says of the door to his studio, "That gateway is incredibly important-what it means to cross that boundary, what is in and what is out."

On one side of the door is the world of the Resource Center; on the other is his private domain: the sovereign imaginative realm of an artist. To take some object or material that interests him out of the waste stream and bring it across the threshold of his studio is to place it in a setting where he can isolate it from the flood, live with it and brood about it, make himself available to the questions it presents and the artistic possibilities it contains.

"Behind that door," Dan Peterman observes, "any level of obsession is possible."

In his recent exhibition at the Smart Museum, Peterman explored these themes-the fate of objects, the nature of border institutions, the trajectory of obsession-through an unusual exercise in resource recovery. On a circular stage he arranged an eclectic set of objects. Among them: handheld Geiger counters, metal rods, stacked chairs, squares of paraffin wax, a pulley, assorted canisters and containers, a Ted Williams Sears & Roebuck fishing reel, a stack of yellowing magazines (Popular Science, Mechanix Illustrated, etc.), electric wire of various gauges, the wheels from a cart, glass tubes, a portable Underwood typewriter, jars of Arrowroot, a fire extinguisher, and a book titled *New Formulas For Profit: Shortcuts to Fortune*.

The objects on display at the Smart were, as Peterman puts it, "an excerpt" from "The Universal Lab," the name he gave to an eccentric private research facility created and sustained for a quarter of a century by a small group of lab technicians and others loosely affiliated with the University. The lab was at once a setting for independent research and a recycling operation. As objects and materials were discarded by research labs on campus, they found their way to the Universal Lab. In a statement he prepared for the exhibition, Peterman writes of the lab in its early years as a "free space...a domain for science that was modest, local, accessible, and connected to immediate human needs and goals." It was the setting out of which Midway Labs, an innovative solar-energy company, emerged ("A Shining Example," June/94).

Eventually, however, "for reasons explicable only by the idiosyncrasies of the individuals involved, the endless project of diverting materials from landfills overran the aspirations of scientific research." The lab was inundated with materials collected obsessively and indiscriminately. Over time, the participants in the lab lost their lease. The building in which it was housed was sold, and the new owners were faced with the need to remove the accumulated mass of materials.

At this point, the Resource Center and Peterman intervened to dismantle the lab and recycle its contents, a complicated process in view of the quantity and variety of chemicals that have surfaced. Peterman's exhibition at the Smart Museum is a by-product of this effort. He describes the exhibition as "a point of reflection"-a moment of arrested attention-in a process that originates outside the art museum, flows through it, then returns to the wider world.

When Peterman characterizes the "utopic vision" of the Universal Lab as a "free space," an autonomous domain of inquiry and collaboration, he could be describing his vision of 61st Street. In 1995, a convergence of circumstances enabled him to acquire ownership of the site. He then embarked on a process of reclaiming it from the weight of materials that had accumulated there over the years and then of reconceiving and redesigning it. The path he has pursued-haphazardly direct, as a poet once described a dog's course of movement-reflects strong preferences and underlying principles of design.

The common approach when an artist acquires a building is to rent studio space to other artists. Peterman regards that sort of monoculture as "an impoverishment, a diminishing of possibilities." He was clear from the start that, while he would make some space available to artists, he wanted to do something different to weave together a variety of enterprises and in so doing to explore the possibility of a different basis for supporting the arts.

As he has developed 61st Street, Peterman has shown respect for the given, for the traditional usages of the place. This is perhaps clearest in the case of Mr. Wong, the auto mechanic who has worked at 61st Street since the earliest days of the Resource Center. Peterman has reconfigured a garage space for Wong. And he is now ruminating about the possibility of developing some form of light manufacturing process around Wong, in light of changes in the auto repair trade that have reduced his clientele.

The most intriguing reinvention of Resource Center traditions is the Blackstone Bicycle Works. Peterman was centrally involved in establishing the BBW in 1994. At once a novel venture in recycling and an educational initiative, the bike shop is staffed by skilled mechanics who work with local Woodlawn youths to restore and sell recycled bikes and provide repair services. By investing their labor, the youths earn bike parts, helmets, and complete bicycles. Next door to the bike shop is Big Fish Furniture, a quality woodworking shop, created by two Resource Center board members. Among the most popular of Big Fish's products are a line of tables fashioned from richly textured planks of wood salvaged from a demolished warehouse by Ken Dunn.

61st Street houses the office of the Neighborhood Conservation Corps, an organization composed of inner-city residents working to create a model of "grassroots public works." It is also home to The Baffler, a magazine staffed largely by former University of Chicago graduate students and known for its sharp, witty critiques of consumer culture.

"61st Street," observes Peterman, "has evolved through an organic process of design and now has a life of its own. This is the sort of design process I am comfortable with: paying close attention to the particulars, while trusting the general to emerge."

His style of stewardship involves both exercising authority and relinquishing control. "My participation at this point is substructural. It doesn't have to be overt. Basically, it's a matter of maintaining the building and intersecting with people in the course of the day. I don't need to call meetings."

It is clear that the form of 61st Street issues from his needs and impulses as an artist. Yet he resists any tendency to characterize the site as a work of art in itself. When one suggests that his work generally is an instance of art as a form of recycling, he gently resists the notion. The formulation is too confining. It denies him the flexibility and agility, the mobility across borders that is essential to his practice.

"What I value about the art world is its inclusiveness, the way it allows for multiple frameworks, perspectives, discourses," Peterman observes, as he sets out to do some weeding in the garden. "To call 61st Street an art project would just muddle things."

BERLIN

DAN PETERMAN
KLOSTERFELDE

At the moment the most interesting sculptures are those which do not seem at first to be obviously art objects, but perhaps pieces of interior design or furniture. In this respect the young Chicago artist Dan Peterman designs tables, benches, and pallets with recycled artificial material. Here his tables and benches have been used as places of rest as well as objects to look at.

Visitors sat, laid and stood on the furniture, objects that were not arranged to create a particular meaning. The exhibition was consequently titled "Accessories to an Event." Peterman related his idea of sculpture on the one hand to Rirkrit Tiravanija, who also puts emphasis on aspects of communication and conceives sculpture as a form of process. But Peterman also relates his works to Maria Eichhorn, Ayse Erkmen, Jorge Pardo and Andrea Zittel, who conceive sculpture as a form of attitude as well as a model of perception.

The tables and pallets are not autonomous works. Peterman constructed the tables so that the weight of five compares to the average consumption per year of two persons in the US. This could be a starting point for discussion, but these objects are less instructive in terms of ecological ideas than is the average article in a serious newspaper. The material side of the object stands rather for the fact that it is one hundred percent politically correct; however, beyond the art historical relations with Bauhaus traditions, Donald Judd and Joseph Beuys, the material side serves as a reference to the real world.

The more practical an object is, the closer it is to advanced furniture design. If an artist is not able to create an imaginative model, s/he may push the limits of art a bit further, but towards an area in which designers are already producing marketable objects. Like many younger artists, Peterman knows that in the art world the object is more easily judged for what it means and not by how it sells and that the pressure to produce marketable objects is less strong than in designer stores. He also knows that the artist is still free to play with concepts in a basically free area - thanks to the gallery.

Flash Art



Dan Peterman *Accessories to an Event*, 1996 Installation View

Art in America

January 1993

Dan Peterman at N.A.M.E-Chicago Illinois

Dan Peterman's exhibition "Standing Below Grade" addressed issues of material consumption and waste, reflecting the artist's continued interest in the economics of waste management and recycling. The 10 installations on view merged Conceptual and Minimalist strategies with a politicized agenda for creating real change within our global environment.

Peterman shares the ecological concerns of other Chicago artists, such as Joe Scanian and Michael Paha, who use the physical vestiges and refuse of daily existence as a source for their esthetic and social investigations. Although their work comments to some degree on the shallow consumerism of the previous decade, these artists successfully transcend the dogmatic posturing that characterizes much of today's activist art.

The site of Peterman's artistic production is Chicago's Resource Center, a not-for-profit recycling center where the artist works and keeps his studio. Made almost exclusively of recycled and synthetically fabricated materials, Peterman's idiosyncratic sculptures, architectural environments and community interventions blur the boundaries between art and social management. For this exhibition, Peterman brought his public activities into the gallery setting by means of emblematic installations, extensively documented. While some of these works require more scientific knowledge than the viewer may possess, they nonetheless provide political initiatives that equate artistic process with that of recycling.

In Vermicomposter (1992), a large fiberglass basin contains a damp bedding of shredded newspaper, organic food compost and a pound of live red worms capable of consuming up to three pounds of refuse. To this central structure the artist has attached plywood seats and legs made from reprocessed plastic to create a bench, transforming the waste receptacle into a functional object for the home. In Plastic to Burn (1990), the artist offers a noxious energy "alternative" by presenting two seemingly identical blocks of fuel—one made of coal, the other of reprocessed plastic.

Other works point to the often contradictory and flawed conditions of various systems of ecological control. In Roundup (1992), two green garden hoses are bound together and coiled to form a circular "rug" on the gallery floor; one hose contains "Miracle-gro," the other weed killer. In Recycled Plastic Tires (1990), three 12-sided "tires" made from reprocessed plastic milk jugs and soda bottles offer a sardonic commentary on the frequent futility of our present-day recycling strategies.

Store (cheese) (1991-) is an ongoing project that attests to the power of art to raise public awareness about environmental hazards. The work, a padlocked refrigerator containing a round of toxic cheese, was created to call attention to a case of accidental insecticide poisoning that contaminated 51 cows belonging to the Weber family dairy farm near Hillsboro, Wis. According to the accompanying documentation, Peterman used milk from the affected cows to make the cheese, then isolated it in the refrigerator, where it will remain quarantined until it can be properly disposed of.

Despite the artist's penchant for explicit social commentary, the exhibition is not deadly serious. There is a gritty, folksy quality to these works that harks back to the city's rich tradition of found-object art and allows Peterman to exercise his wry sense of humor. The wit with which he draws upon these resources lends all the more credence to his insistence that art really can serve the cause of social betterment.

Susan Snodgrass