

THE SUSTAINABLE ART SHOW

Organized and Curated by Sara Reisman and John Cloud Kaiser

Curatorial Statement by Sara Reisman

The Sustainable Art Show marks ten years of artists-in-residence at Materials for the Arts (MFTA), both a program of the city and an organization beloved by the arts community, the public school system, and nonprofits across New York City. The impetus for Materials for the Arts was prompted by a request to a radio show in 1978 by artist Angela Fremont who was working in Central Park for the Department of Cultural Affairs. She wrote a letter to a radio station in search of a refrigerator for medicine for an animal at the Central Park Zoo. Within a half hour of the request being announced on-air, there were three refrigerators offered by listeners. An artist looking for an appliance – whether it was new or used didn't matter – led to the founding of Materials for the Arts, which is now the largest creative reuse center in New York City, with a 35,000 square foot warehouse in Long Island City, Queens. Through partnerships with the Departments of Sanitation and Education, Materials for the Arts has received support from the Department of Sanitation's Bureau of Waste Prevention, Reuse, and Recycling, making it possible for school teachers across the city to access free art supplies, as part an ongoing effort to restore and expand arts programming. The impact of this reversal of the seemingly inevitable tide of waste of the city is major: on an annual basis, MFTA redistributes and diverts over one million pounds of waste from landfill each year.

For most New York City-based cultural workers in the nonprofit sector – artists, curators, arts administrators, and educators – a visit to the warehouse is an experience of chance and wonder, but also a rite of passage. The scale of resources is breathtaking. Having worked at the Department of Cultural Affairs for the Percent for Art program between 2008 and 2014, I, along with colleagues from the agency, participated in a day of service at the warehouse. There, we helped sort incoming supplies including office furniture, glassware, ceramic tiles, glitter, brochures and postcards from the Museum of Modern Art, musical instruments, buttons, and sun hats – the list goes on. The volume and diversity of materials is a perfect place for an artist to find inspiration, a logical palette for artists in residence. That day of service with colleagues was around the same time as the first residency was launched in 2012, initiated by John Cloud Kaiser and former director Harriet Taub, whose social media handle is “The Materials Girl.”

Prior to working for the city, I had visited the warehouse a handful of times, alongside artists who were programs at organizations where I was working. A typical visit involved accompanying a limited number of artists who could take anything they wanted, so long as they made arrangements to pick these items up the same day. My first visits were when I worked at Socrates Sculpture Park, in 2005, and later, at the International Studio & Curatorial Program, around 2007. My sense of the artists' experience in this 'free

store' was that it was liberating but also one of slight anxiety that they might miss out on some component that could end up being critical to their work. The first time I visited an artist-in-residence was during a studio visit in 2016 with Jean Shin. The unfettered access to donated goods introduced Shin to a slightly different way of working. Typically, her sculptural projects involve gathering like objects—for example, in the past she has worked with keys, trophies, clothing, and plates—within the framework of a community whose members are asked to contribute specific items, which Shin has then assembled into large scale installations. The solicitation of these offerings means her process often relies on a local, community-based supply chain. At MFTA, the constant influx of new donations made for an especially prolific phase, one where the outreach to community members for a specific type of object was already done. *Spring Collection* (2016) captured the chance beauty of remnants left behind in the manufacturing of handbags. The outer edges of the leather she found revealed the original hide of the animal skin. *Spring Collection* built on earlier projects like *Alterations* (1999), *Cut Outs* and *Suspended Seams* (both 2004), which involved assembling formal compositions from the offcuts of altered trousers and blue jeans, and fabric cut from the clothes of museum employees. On view in *The Sustainable Art Show*, Shin's installation is an early work that speaks to museum archival and documentation practices. *Projections* (2018) is a vertical installation of a cascade of 35 mm slides documenting exhibitions that were discarded by the Metropolitan Museum in a donation to MFTA. The volumetric scale of this sculptural installation compared to Barak Chamo's two NFT (non-fungible token) installations shows how radically technology has changed in just the decade that the residency has been underway. And yet Chamo's NFT's, especially *Apocryphal Visions 2* (2022), digitally render and archive the detritus of news media found online into a composite, echoing Shin's impulse to catalog physical objects, in the most virtual of forms.

One tendency found in *The Sustainable Art Show* is to transform waste material into organic structures. Michael Kelly Williams, Juan Hinojosa, Lina Puerta, and Annalisa Iadicicco have all made work that speaks to nature. Towards the entrance to the gallery is Williams' *Star Burst I* (2022), which is, for the artist, uncharacteristically plant-like, lighter in form than is typical in Williams' densely structured assemblages that often bring together seemingly unrelated objects into configurations that feel suddenly logical and familiar: a violin with a rake, or a crutch with musical embellishments like a cymbal and bells. With the spindliest of leaves, Williams still makes an oblique reference to musical instruments that often figure into his sculptures and two-dimensional work, using piano wire for some of the lines of the sculpture. Puerta's contribution to the exhibition is organic but rather than the botanical plants oozing from the wall that she is known for, *Galaxy 25* (2018), a composition of found insect wings, feather, lace, and sequined fabric, appears to come from a cooler, less tropical clime: a geode embedded in the white surface of a glacier, or maybe the depths of the sea. Annalisa Iadicicco's *Stop and Smell the Flowers #5* (2022) is an oversized flower constructed from colorful stainless steel scraps, a garden hose, vinyl, copper wires, beads, metal, wood, electrical wire and a lightbulb, imbuing her artwork with use value as a light fixture, as if to return some of the materials found in the MFTA warehouse to their original use as household objects.

A logical approach to the glut of material is collage. Williams, Puerta, and Iadicicco assemble materials into three dimensions, whereas Juan Hinojosa's two-dimensional works titled *Free Falling* (2015) and *Mondays* (2021) flatten disparate visual information, like ticket stubs, a black and white photograph, a scratched off lotto ticket, and bits of geometric abstract patterns, playfully suggesting symmetry where it doesn't exist. Andrea Burgay cites John Dewey's notion that "we occupy a space of our own creation – a collage compounded of bits and pieces of actuality arranged into a design determined by our internal perceptions, our hopes, our fears, our memories, and our anticipations." Using collage to envision alternate realities, Burgay's painterly abstractions – like *Circle Game* (2018) – are embedded with forms both familiar and strange. Circles and triangles dissipate into vertical strips of paper, with the illusion of depth and shadow, like an internal code. If the internal code is represented by abstraction, then perhaps the external world is rendered more realistically. Tijay Mohammed's *Jamila* (2022) is layered with paper scraps on cardboard, depicting a woman with beaded, braided hair playing a trumpet, set against the landscape of a map. The flesh of Jamila's face and arms are flecked with the text from the pages of a book Mohammed has cut and pasted in place of her skin – another version of the internal code, a different take on constructing a subject's identity.

An alternate path to abstraction can be found in the folded forms of Ben Pederson's *Family Portrait* (2017), a flock of origami birds gathered in the back of the gallery, in a pattern of gold, green, red, and yellow against a black wall accent wall. His process often transforms scrappy household objects into artworks. Here, in *The Sustainable Art Show*, *Family Portrait* reverses that: the carefully creased paper of the origami birds is actually made from traditional art supplies like wood, cardboard, foam core, epoxy, clay and several kinds of paint.

However intentional we are about wasting not, life in a city is to co-exist with the flow of waste material. Bernard Klevickas' sculptural assemblage *Emergence* (2010) creates a gem from the riveted corners and edges of black, plastic takeout containers, one of the more ubiquitous objects that makes its way into the waste stream. The geometry of the negative spaces within this artwork is as seductive as the corners of square containers and the curves of the quartered, round vessels used to carry takeout food on a stunning scale. Similarly brutal, Skip LaPlante turns household objects into mobiles that maintain their familiarity – belt buckles dangle from a colander – while conjuring a sense of play. LaPlante's second work in the exhibition, *The Bitter End* (2020) is a black metal grid strung with curving straps of brass. What if these objects embodied spirits? How would they arrange themselves and how would they move? Vadis Turner also refers to the grid, draped like a flag on a white background, titled *Leather Grid with Cinders Study* (2020). Her work synthesizes elements of painting with minimalist sculpture that formally conjures ruins, with frequent associations with grids, that are contracted, twisted, and, like *Leather Grid*, move away from the flatness of two-dimensions and the wall. The formal ambiguity of Turner's work can also be read as a hybrid between painting and sculpture, two- and three- dimensions. This straddling of mediums and dimensionality is apparent in *within without* (2021) by Whitney Oldenburg. A composite

of sand, clay, rock, personal belongings, and remnants of her past work, Oldenburg examines the effects that humans and objects have on one another, with a specific interest in the balance between control and excess. *within without* is imprinted with physical, bodily gestures, produced by the gauging of fingers and hands, layered with black, grey, beige, white, and a blue orifice at the center, signaling Oldenburg's fascination with the tension between desire and discomfort.

Referencing themes of overconsumption, economics, and human insatiability, Elisa Insua uses found, discarded materials to make abstract sculptures. *Circumscribed Movement* (2021) is a photographic print of an intricate maze that maps a Pac-Man video game board. A string of gold beads lines the maze's pathways that are packed with household electronic objects, some obsolete, others potentially still useful: computer mice, remote controls, cassette tapes, electrical adapters, a power strip, and batteries. Insua's use of accumulated objects closes a conceptual loop in dialogue with the work of Jean Shin and Barak Chamo, making logical connections between waste and technological obsolescence. How do the cycles of technology's advances, and the resultant output of refuse, shape our understanding of humanity?

One way that technology has affected our sense of humanity is through its impact on representation, and more specifically, cultural identity. Five artists with distinct practices - Roberto Visani, Sol'Sax, Dianne Smith, Dario Mohr, and Yazmany Arboleda – engage with representation through portraiture, historical research, and community engagement. Yazmany Arboleda's work *Parable of the Sower* (2022) is named after Octavia Butler's 1993 apocalyptic science fiction novel. The artwork is a wooden case bearing an intricately beaded reproduction of the book cover's artwork, a woman in a red dress. Inside the wooden case is the actual book. Both the artwork and Arboleda's practice draw inspiration from the narrative arc of Butler's novel, about a woman and her family who, in the year 2024, live in the last safe neighborhood in Los Angeles when their home is destroyed by fire, forcing the family out of their home to contend with economic and climate crises. The protagonist's hyperempathy imbues her with a sensitivity to the pain of others. Arboleda's broader artistic practice is similarly concerned with the collective, motivated by a commitment to activate communities through collaborative, large-scale art projects that build connections across cultural, economic, and political barriers. Also concerned with shared experience, Dario Mohr often reworks previously completed projects, embedding them with both found and personally nostalgic objects to make space for sanctuary for those who encounter the work. Mohr's *Keep Ya Head Up* (2021), is memorial to two rising American rappers who were shot in devastating instances of gun violence: Tupac Shakur and Nipsey Hussle. Illuminated from below with votive candles, the portraits serve to commemorate the lives and artistry of these two men.

Like Mohr, Roberto Visani, Sol'Sax, and Dianne Smith channel the complexity of the current political moment, one that continues to reveal the ongoing historical omissions and inequities of American culture, especially in the social framework of the United States. Smith's work spans a broad practice that involves twisting, knotting, and tying discarded materials to create abstract forms that become part of her performances, both

as set pieces and costumes. These works are intended to prompt viewers to consider the institutions of race and religion, and how they inform the power structures that produce inequity. Responding to specific events, Smith's work deftly communicates moments of both devastation and joy. Her photograph, *A Harlem Sunday, African American Day Parade* (2018) documents two young children, one in yellow and the other in pink beaded lace bonnets, peering over the barricades along the periphery of the parade in anticipation of its start. At once spiritually potent and conceptually rigorous, Sol'Sax's process, like Smith's, transforms and elevates his chosen materials into spiritually charged configurations, like totems and shrines. While in residence at MFTA, he produced installations and performances for an exhibition titled *Sol'Sain't Many Kin: All Sol'Skin is a Free Kin*, to revisit the lives and lessons of revered figures and spirits central to African and African American cultural history. Sol'Sax's contribution to the exhibition is *Sol'Sain't A Bomber Brown* (2022), an enigmatic photo-collage of a masked fighter in shades of sepia. A figure donning boxing gloves and a Kikongo mask from the Kifwebe society, *Sol'Sain't* metabolizes several histories and cultures into a single frame, an expression of the multiplicity of the artist's own experience.

No less personally driven is Roberto Visani's epic *Cardboard Slave Kit Series* (2022) which draws on several years of research into the representation of enslaved individuals throughout art history. Building on his sculptural practice which has often used 3-D modeling of both found and new cardboard to create surreal and historically accurate forms, the slave kit series were conceived as open editions to be distributed as educational prompts to schools, museums, and community centers where students, museum staff and visitors, and community members are invited to build the structures together. The content for Visani's kits is rooted within the problematic historical archive of slavery, and the creation of the kit is similarly intended to prompt its participants to engage in more dispersed and durational acts of memorialization, while opening up questions about collective and individual accountability to racial equity and justice. Here, Visani's reproduction of a historical bust of an enslaved figure brings into focus the power of representation and art itself to move discourse, and ultimately culture, forward. Each and every artist in *The Sustainable Art Show* demonstrates how artistic practice can directly support sustainability in all of its forms— cultural, ecological, and social. An idea sparked by an artist in 1978 is now an organization within the city's infrastructure, one that sustains artists and their communities, at every stage.

-Sara Reisman