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NO LONGER EMPTY AND ART IN ODD PLACES: UNCONVENTIONAL PUBLIC ART IN NEW YORK

Since the 1970s, the New York art scene has sought ways to bring art out of the confines of the gallery, make it accessible, and engage local residents. Disenchanted by the monumental abstract sculpture preferred by the city's percent-for-art program, artists with less conventional ideas turned to alternative commissioners. Today, numerous organizations dedicate themselves to alternative public art in the five boroughs. Two of these, No Longer Empty and Art in Odd Places, have excelled in their efforts to engage local communities by staging public art events in unusual spots throughout the city.

No Longer Empty's motto, "Revitalizing space. Unlocking creativity," perfectly and succinctly describes its mission of artfully repurposing unused spaces. Founded in 2009, the organization has hosted over a dozen pop-up exhibitions in abandoned and disused buildings. The first show took place in the notorious Chelsea Hotel, which once served as home to some of the most creative minds in America, including Mark Twain, Stanley Kubrick, Bob Dylan, Charles Bukowski, and Jasper Johns. Although not technically abandoned, the hotel was undergoing major changes that residents feared would result in their displacement (and replacement by wealthier tenants). No Longer Empty invited 21 artists to reclaim two empty hotel storefronts, reminding the neighborhood of the seemingly rundown hotel's importance to American culture.

Top right: Leslie Eastman, *Event Horizon—Near*, 2011. Right: XYZ (Natasha Johns-Messenger and Leslie Eastman), *Synoptic-3*, 2011. Both from No Longer Empty's "XYZ:NYC 10 Downing." Below: Cheryl Pope, *Shove*, 2011. From No Longer Empty's "This Side of Paradise."



Over the years, No Longer Empty's exhibitions have shed light on the forgotten histories of gentrifying areas of New York, while drawing attention to environmental issues, poverty, and gay rights. In December 2011, Australian artists Leslie Eastman and Natasha Johns-Messenger organized "XYZ:NYC 10 Downing"—a reference to the exhibition's location, not to the residence of the British Prime Minister—which "challenge[d] perception...through a three-part series of optical site installations designed to force visitors to experience and interpret alternate points of view." The installations included mirrored mazes, a "large camera obscura device," and a virtual reality simulation in which two visitors donned video headsets that displayed cross-wired points of view. The goal was to draw attention to the historical diversity of the West Village—birthplace of bohemian culture and the gay rights movement—through a theoretical exploration of perception.

"This Side of Paradise" invited viewers into the Andrew Freedman Home, a unique retirement home in the Bronx for the genteel poor. Opened in the 1920s, the home, which was funded by the Andrew Freedman estate until the 1960s, invited the formerly affluent to retire as if they still had their fortunes. Residents enjoyed fancy dinners, opera performances, and a wood-paneled library. A popular destination after the stock market crash of 1929, the home slowly depleted its trust money and was all but deserted in an increasingly changing South Bronx. Participating artists drew on the home's history as well as the current realities of the Bronx; their work was accompanied by more than a dozen public events, including a speakeasy, a hip-hop workshop, and a full day celebrating "Flappers and Philosophers." Installations included Sylvia Plachy's sitting room that re-created the home's former glory, Linda Cunningham's evocative installation "built from layers of broken, wall-like constructions and layered with torn, curling canvas," and Cheryl Pope's faux-gold-leaf ceilings and anniversary plates "shoved" into walls and spilling down to the floor below. Interpreting memory with uniquely morbid humor, Justen Ladda created mysterious fountains flowing from the urine streams of hologram skeletons.

While No Longer Empty uses art to revitalize abandoned spaces, Art in Odd Places takes art into the streets. Every fall since 2005, the organization has held a visual and performance art festival down the length of 14th Street, from Avenue C to the Hudson River. The mission is "to stretch the boundaries of communication in the public realm by presenting artworks in all disciplines outside the confines of traditional public space regulations." Founded by a group of artists led by Ed Woodham, Art in Odd Places works with both local and international artists, many of whom have presented multiple pieces over the years.

The 10-day 2011 festival brought together more than 60 artists and teams to explore "Ritual." One of the most memorable projects was Sherry Aliberti's *Cocoon*, in which people wrapped in brightly colored textile "cocoon" danced down 14th Street, stopping every so often to do yoga poses and contort themselves into phone booths. This "ritual" came to an end at sunset, when the cocoon people gathered for a "liturgy" on the Hudson.

Although primarily a festival of performance, Art in Odd Places welcomes artists of all genres seeking interactions with an often unsuspecting public. Some of the more sculptural projects in 2011 included New Mexico artist Michael Borowski's *Wash/Closely*, "a nomadic device designed to



Top: Katie Urban, *Processional Walkway*, 2011. Above: Sherry Aliberti, *Cocoon*, 2011. Both from "Art in Odd Places 2011: Ritual."

bring the rituals surrounding the bathroom sink into public space," and Andrea Moccio's folded silk paper construction overflowing from a fountain in Union Square. For the meticulous *Processional Walkway*, Brooklyn-based Katie Urban laid 50,000 rose petals along the 14th Street sidewalk in an effort to "elevate the simple ritual of walking down the street to an event worthy of celebration." Art in Odd Places has already confirmed more than 100 artists for "Model," its 2012 festival, which promises to "take pedestrians off their predictable paths and move them into a new awareness of their everyday landscape."

Always in search of new ways to bring art to a wider audience, organizations like No Longer Empty and Art in Odd Places are setting a course for the future of public art. Engaged, participatory, and experiential, their projects revive local history, celebrate the unique and odd, and draw attention to the different kinds of everyday life in the communities where they exhibit and perform.

—Elena Goukassian

Juries are convened each month to select works for Commissions. Information on recently completed commissions, along with high-resolution digital images (300 dpi at 4 x 5 in. minimum), should be sent to: Commissions, Sculpture, 1633 Connecticut Avenue NW, 4th Floor, Washington, DC 20009. E-mail <elena@sculpture.org>.