

## Back to Basics and Back Again: Dan Peterman

It's common knowledge that recycling has had a very limited effect on the imbalance between the production and consumption of natural resources. The idea that we can save the planet by managing our glass, newspapers and plastics in naïve, not only because those materials are a mere fraction of the problem but also because they have not been readily absorbed into primary manufacturing processes. In any case, the journey from the garbage bin and back again is only one of many orbits that materials go through after they cease to be bauxite, petroleum, or trees. Thus the real concern of the planet is not the dissipation of garbage but the management of materials in constant states of transformation, commodification, and motion—a fact that the recycling industry seems reluctant to admit.

As long as that is the case, Dan Peterman's work will not be about recycling. True, over the last ten years he has worked extensively with aluminum cans, recycled plastics and flammable garbage, and if there is a flaw in his method it is his own blindness to how strictly coded these materials are for most people. To be fair, Peterman's blindness is more accurately an extreme focus, a proximity and familiarity with waste materials that precludes the didacticism usually associated with recycling. For six years after graduate school Peterman worked as a bulk mover and sorter for a southside Chicago recycling company called The Resource Center, an experience that seems to have expanded his student interest in object making processes into a broader stream of material consciousness. Knee-deep in the flux of the city's refuse, Peterman developed an 'oceanic' appreciation of its absurd scale, to use Robert Smithson's term (via Freud) for the anxiety induced by any seemingly limitless or formless expanse.

Peterman's projects thus far (and there are many) are the direct result of negotiating his relationship to this expanse. Sometimes he attempts to map or structure it; other times he takes samples, turning them into art. Peterman's works do not function as conclusions of final objects but as a kind of freeze-frame of larger systems in constant motion, crude models for how materials and products have become as transient as information. They are rooted entirely in his material experience, but his sensitivity towards the life cycle of substances allows his artworks to question their less tangible traits: symbolic meanings, social functions and monetary values. While working towards a more congenious definition of art, he resists the current distinctions between conventional, institutional, site-specific and public art, suggesting that these distinctions are created by the artwork's reception. All his works are formulated as public propositions, but geared to different audiences and for different effects.

Chicago Compost Shelter (1988) marked a seminal development in Peterman's conceptual sophistication and sense of humor. Winter being a particularly tough time for aluminum scavengers in Chicago, Peterman devised a temporary warming shelter at The Resource Center's Seventy-First Street aluminum buy-back station. He began by constructing a wood canopy and door into the side of a defunct Volkswagen microbus; fashioned the interior with curtains, carpeting, blankets and a working radio; and then buried the entire vehicle in active compost, which gives off heat as a by-product of its chemical breakdown. (In addition to traditional recyclables, The Resource Center also composts a lot of the city of Chicago's organic waste, much of which is horse manure generated by the division of mounted police.) The shelter maintained a 75-degree temperature throughout the winter, providing its audience with a reasonable place to warm up or spend the night.

The construction and intent of Compost Shelter grounded Peterman's personal philosophy on his place in the wider scheme of things, as well as the extent to which he believed he could influence the status quo. Formally, the Compost Shelter was nearly identical to Robert Smithson's Partially Buried Wood Shed (1970). But where Smithson's seminal work was structured around the idea of making

entropy visible (dirt was piled onto the roof of a woodshed until the center beam cracked, at which point the activity was stopped), Compost Shelter's confluence of materials was constructive, even hospitable—bringing a dilapidated van, organic waste and natural forces together in such a way that their traits complemented, rather than contradicted, each other. For Peterman—and for a lot of us—Smithson's willful futility and fatalism have become a matter of course. And yet Peterman proposes that realistically reducing the potential of human influence doesn't necessarily mean a diminution of agency, nor a lessening of the belief that change is still possible.

These shifts in scale and effectiveness are most evident in Peterman's idea of what constitutes a natural resource. For him, bricks of aluminum cans and planks of reprocessed milk cartons are no less raw materials than timber or coal. Peterman's lack of distinction between consumer waste and natural resources shifts his concept of nature away from its classical definition towards "all the stuff that nobody else wants." Basically, a natural resource becomes anything that is accessible or affordable, regardless of how much it has been pre-processed or post-consumed. Nature is no longer primordial, some pure place or thing to be protected, but a complex system of material weights and volumes to be stockpiled, traded, and used.

In 1993 Dan Peterman, Sonia Labouriau, Kirsten Mosher and Nancy Rubins were invited to do "outdoor" projects in the charred shell of the New York Kunsthalle, which had been devastated by fire just before its official opening. Peterman had already been experimenting with the sculptural possibilities of a plastic plank product made from milk jugs and marketed as an indestructible substitute for wood. Its primary uses have been outdoor furniture and walls for playgrounds, parks and golf courses. Amused by the irony of so many urban nature preserves deploying such a synthetic and brutally permanent material, Peterman purchased 3,600 lbs of it to construct a kind of petrochemical banquet table that was both a by-product of and a potential site for mass consumption. The table's length also mimicked the material's manufacturing process: discarded plastic is shredded, emulsified, compressed and then extruded faster than applications or markets can be found for it. In a limited way Peterman has done his bit by purchasing a personal allotment of recycled plastic planks from which he makes, and remakes, art. Invited to participate in a group show at John Gibson Gallery in New York this summer, Peterman shipped a portion of the Kunsthalle piece to the gallery, reconfiguring it into a patio with benches, the remainder staying at the Kunsthalle until another project beckons or some configuration of it is purchased as art. Meanwhile, the artist has a convenient stockpile of work, strategically maintaining a "presense" (or nuisance) in New York.

Peterman's ongoing SO<sub>2</sub>Project began in the Aperto section of the 1993 Venice Biennale, where he exhibited six certificates through which anyone could grant him the power of attorney to purchase sulfur dioxide shares on their behalf. There were no takers, so Peterman purchased five shares at \$250 each for himself at the most recent auction in April. He was the highest bidder, though his shares represent only 0.00005 percent of the total allotment sold. The top volume buyer was Allowance Holding Corporation, who purchased 90,000 shares at \$150 apiece—89.3 percent of the allotment—which pretty much set the market price. Nonetheless, for \$1,250 Dan Peterman purchased the right to place five tons of sulfur dioxide into roughly 30 cubic miles of the atmosphere.

Since then he has learned that the most effective way for coal-burning power plants to reduce SO<sub>2</sub> emissions is to install 'scrubbers' in their chimneys, where limestone and water draw the most SO<sub>2</sub> out of the coal smoke. The by-product of this process is gypsum, the main ingredient for manufacturing plasterboard and drywall. This incidental production of gypsum could end the mining of 'natural' gypsum, as corporations source the material from power companies instead of the hills of northern Minnesota.

Drywall and electricity are important utilities for contemporary art galleries, and the versatility and economy of drywall technology played a major role in the proliferation of such archetypal spaces as white cubes, rehabbed industrial lofts, and corporate lobbies. Thus Peterman's investment is not so much about making money on the futures market as it is about purchasing a volume of material that is obliquely linked to our experience of art, and then making these links more visible. Peterman's SO<sub>2</sub> allotment might be calculated into a commensurate amount of gypsum or lighting to be used in an installation; increased or decreased in terms of its monetary value as the market develops; or expanded exponentially in relation to its corollary atmospheric volume if allowable SO<sub>2</sub> levels are reduced. Given the specific electric consumption or wall space of an art institution, Peterman might also enlist the institution itself in the SO<sub>2</sub> market in order to transfer shares to their account, thereby indicating the scale of the institution's waste production and consumption and its relation to culture and the environment—in other words, the marketplace.

It remains unclear whether the SO<sub>2</sub> shares will be either a worthwhile investment or an effective control mechanism. It also remains unclear what the context of Peterman's project is, what its audience or impact might be, or how any of his actions are being received—questions which he intends to frame more precisely in an installation at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art in November. For now he prefers this ambiguity, this confusion of intention and potential. This, of course, is the nature of the "free" marketplace. As the variables now stand, the gradual reduction of SO<sub>2</sub> emissions over the next ten years will lead to either a huge surplus of gypsum, the proliferation of other power sources (most likely nuclear), or the eventual obsolescence of the SO<sub>2</sub> futures market. Most likely, however, is that enough interested money will get involved to reduce emission levels to a certain degree, but never so far as to jeopardize the interests of business. A permanent level of managed pollution would be the result, not exactly a utopian outcome.

Peterman has clearly signed onto a system outside of his control, yet his actions as an artist don't demonstrate a literal faith in telling stories or seizing control. Rather they operate as metaphors for what's individually possible in the new world of managed air space and material ownership. The SO<sub>2</sub> Project is not about playing commodities broker, but about the fact that gambling with such huge volumes—and consequences—is even possible. Is it conceivable to go shopping and have that activity 'produce' as many resources as it consumes? The question posed by the modest, visually deadpan, Sulfur Dioxide certificates is, do you want that to be the case? Will you have a choice? Either way, Peterman's offer to purchase individual pieces of sky on our behalf is one of the most disturbingly pragmatic and poetic gestures of our time.

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