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Museums Article

Peer Pleasure 2 at YBCA

Collaborative Art Makes Good

By [Nirmala Nataraj](#) (May 05, 2006) [ShareThis](#)

- [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts \(YBCA\)](#)
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- [Peer Pleasure II: Red 76, Temporary Services](#)
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Traditional gallery vestibules seem like appropriate settings for most fine art -- considering that even the most provocative works of our time have been subdued by the sterile, academic *raison d'etre* of modern criticism. Besides the fact that the archetypal artist is a lonely malcontent, happy to showcase his or her work in compartmentalized settings that don't spur viewer interaction or much of a two-way sentiment, for that matter. Not so with "Peer Pleasure 2", an exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts that focuses on the social potential of making art with folks of like



Red 76's "growing carrots in sidewalk cracks" project

minds as well as triggering a transformation (from passivity to activity) in the way spectators apprehend their surroundings.

The exhibition is composed of the work of three artist collectives: Temporary Services, Visible Collective, and Red 76. The exhibition offers an idealistic vision of power in numbers, throwing out the "every man for himself" formula and ditching artistic complacency for an astute, socially responsible (and responsive) analysis of our politically loaded environment, which all too often appears innocuous at first glance.

Temporary Services, an artist collective focused on fostering non-competitive relationships with other artists, explores the social environment of the prison system by introducing viewers to the drawings and inventions of a prison inmate named Angelo. Angelo's diagrams reveal the labyrinthine dynamics of the prison complex, as mitigated by inmates' inventiveness. Since Angelo and his inmates don't have access to the usual commodities, they create their own primitive versions of objects such as paper cups, bookshelves, and cigarette lighters. Angelo's inventions subsist like curios under glass, and are accompanied by stories and sketches that emphasize the desperation, loneliness, desire, and ingenuity of inmates attempting to survive in a system that denies them access to things most of us take for granted.

The assembled items construct a veritable archaeology of prison life, giving spectators a tactile physical and architectural sense of Angelo's surroundings. The inventions include secret compartments for cigarette lighters, cigarette lighters themselves, cardboard shelves, contraband radios, and papier mache dice. Objects such as clothing hangers point to larger cultural dynamics, such as Hispanic and white supremacist inmates' obsession with cleanliness; while novelties such as a "muff bag" and prophylactics reveal how inmates' sexuality is a direct response to the parameters of prison life.

The exhibition also includes an actual blueprint of a prison cell, and its constructed composite -- a gloomy tin cubicle that makes spectators uncomfortably conscious of space as a taken for granted luxury. In including the accumulated objects, Temporary Services not only raises viewers' eyebrows in a mixture of awe and consternation but they also make us perfectly aware of how the simplest of commodities define our very existence.

Visible Collective, a cluster of artists in the United States and

abroad, are also included in the exhibition, and take on the media with their project, "Disappeared in America", an installation that uses the faces and voices of post-9/11 Muslims, who slink along the news continuum between crudely visible and glaringly absent. Through films, installation, and lectures, Visible Collective delineates the security panic and various degrees of illegality perceived in Arabs and South Asians due to racial profiling and widespread propaganda regarding the dubious loyalties of immigrants.

In creating an astounding timeline of severely compromised civil liberties, along with stories of detained or deported immigrants, Visible Collective undercuts the myth of the model minority by circumscribing it with the all-too-familiar dictum of impending terror. Blurred images of immigrants (which take on an elegiac sentiment, as if in homage to those who didn't survive all the hate crimes and public scrutiny), partial lists of detainees arrested in the first post-9/11 sweep, and revealing text from the 5th Amendment and Patriot Act all effectively serve to call attention to the government's complicity in extirpating immigrants' vital presence from the American conscience.

Finally, Red 76, a Portland, Oregon-based collective, shares their wildly popular "How To" projects. The collective scrutinizes thought and action in the public space, raising questions such as: What is public space? Where is it? How can we transform this space so that citizens are not just aware of it, but also begin to recognize how their activities fill and trigger it? The "how to" projects at hand essentially reshift normal activities into activist pursuits.

Makeshift wooden shelves covered in scrawls such as "Grow carrots in sidewalk cracks -- or at least make it look that way" and photographs that evidence the collective's commitment to such mandates abound in the exhibition. Video documentation of events such as the collective's Laundry Lecture series (which attempts to transfer an idea closely associated with the ivory tower of academia into the most mundane of spaces) and Protest Karaoke (which rethinks the political ramifications of what many of us perceive to be simple pop songs) offer whimsical and subtle suggestions for mobilization and resistance, and, most importantly, inspire participants to alter the very notion of how a public space should function.

Whether the overall exhibition is busy examining the

circumstances of human inventiveness and how objects have the power to classify our lives; the concept of insider/outsider status and who gets to enjoy the space we so often undervalue; or how the act of noticing space empowers us in also (re)claiming it -- the message is abundantly clear: collaboration is perhaps the boldest act of resistance an artist has at his or her disposal.

Exhibition runs through July 2.

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