

Communicating about Communication

Smack Mellon in Dumbo, Brooklyn shows an ambitious collaborative effort:

"MIR 2 - WE WILL RETURN"

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While outer space is way too huge for subversive elements, one might say that the current show at Smack Mellon reaches its best when walkie talkie signals from roaming neighbourhood kids interfere with those of the artists in the "MIR 2" show.

"How are your turtles doing, Bercowetz?"

"I've got a turtle named Penis!"

Jesse Bercowetz's space pod (in collaboration with Matt Bua) is the perfect example of how the "MIR 2" show blurs the line between work and play, manhood and boyhood. Bercowetz touches on the problems of being an artist trying to establish himself in an uptight art world in which more time is dedicated to "making connections" than to working, playing or creating (or what have you). Along these lines Bercowetz took this opportunity to change the ways of the world (or the art world). In "MIR 2" he spends his time in boys' heaven experimenting with water turtles and defending his pod with cardboard weapons. He is also supposedly working on a human waste disposal system - 15 feet above ground -- under the guise that he will NEVER return to earth; only perhaps for a pit stop. Bercowetz' found objects and fragments that were manipulated and randomly attached to the surface of his shuttle resemble an eighties' action toy: Think Battlestar Galactica, Buck Rogers, and Star Wars.

The question is: Once you've made it into outer space, is everything really possible?

Entering "MIR 2", the interactive multimedia group show of more than 20 New Yorker artists, one is doubtful. You are greeted by 20+ video monitors, upon which if you're lucky you'll catch a glimpse of Carry Dashow's performance as a one-woman Houston manning the controls. Dashow's video and communications system transmits video and conversations from the space units to the monitors and the speakers at the gallery entrance. If you happen to live around Dumbo you might even catch the live transmissions broadcast via the pirate radio station, 103.9 FM.

Inside the spacious gallery the highly elaborate pieces hang suspended

from the ceiling. It's an impressive sight. However, due to the gallery's restrictions, they are fenced in, keeping visitors from walking underneath the space station and seeing a truly bottom-up view of the gigantic mass of pods.

Ambient and not so ambient static sounds by Mead Jones and Foil (who recorded their performance on the night of the opening) heighten the experience as one walks through the cold, blinking atmosphere of the space.

The "MIR 2" exhibit acts as a microcosm of the International Space Station, which, in the future, is supposed to replace the original Soviet Mir. As a collaborative effort, the exhibit is a result of what happens when a lot of people come together on one project: they communicate more about communication than content.

Watching the performance it became apparent that the artists had difficulty communicating amongst themselves, and as a result, they failed to form a cohesive vision, at least in terms of the actual aesthetics of the structure itself.

Indeed, although the esoteric tie-dyed peace sign (Ann Shostrom) on Ward Shelley's and Peter Soriano's huge blown up "Hindenburg" wants you to think the opposite, the collaboration was more like an extraterrestrial battle of wills than a harmonious working environment.

As an interactive installation, the viewer who wants to reach "outer space" in order to communicate with the monkeylike "performance" artists has either to wait for Julian Stark's robotic arm to reach down and pick up a message or rely on walkie talkies, video, and radio transmitters. But beware! Having your message picked up or sent doesn't mean that it will be delivered as it was meant to be: Words get jumbled and messages get lost, mimicking modern life.

Despite the obvious bickering within the group, each unit still manages to enhance the other, and the pieces pull together as a more wonderful whole. However, this is only under the rubric of living in outer space, be it working, playing, relaxing, or resting in isolation.

On the whole the show in Dumbo provides another intriguing insight into artists' game plans, in regards to the many and varied survival tactics, that the contemporary art world demands. Some pieces are transparent making the working artist visible inside (Shelley's and Soriano's clear pod manned by Tulle Ruth), others are more of a fortification. Matt Bua simply avoids any encounter with the (con-) temporary art world, directly or metaphorically, by enclosing himself a

tight silver cocoon.

Even though an open field of opportunity was originally offered to the participants some of the pieces unfortunately got stuck in the mastery of construction or forgot entirely that every art piece has a designable surface, especially in the case where the surface is all one can see from below. Kanoa Baysa's luxury lounge is rendered practically obsolete -- what good is the seduction of luxury when one can't even see it?

The most romantic, and also idealistic piece of the show is Daniel Seiple's styrofoam stairway, held afloat high above the other works by helium-filled mylar balloons. His "Spacebridge" literally bridges the other artists' work, but at the same time stands on its own in a charming, playful, perhaps lofty way.