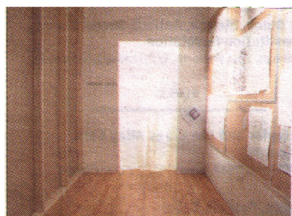


UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

Gallery 400 (MC 033)
College of Architecture and the Arts
400 South Peoria Street
Chicago, Illinois 60607-7034

Urban Warp/Weft
Social Work
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Social Work

By Jason Foumberg

TO BE AN ARTIST IS TO BE A PROFESSIONAL DILETTANTE. With what ease does the artist dip in and out of various scientific, economic and political source material and then claim expertise! Often the artist is only an expert of his or her craft; the content of the work, even if it strives to be socially responsible, falls behind the creative practice.

Such is the case with two concept-driven exhibitions now on view, Dannielle Tegeder's "The Chicago Index of the Invisible: Incidents and Interconnections," which charts years' worth of missing-person cases in Illinois, and Stuart Keeler and Amanda Browder's "Urban Warp/Weft," an exhibition that considers the issue of "green" or sustainable living. Both exhibits present their subject matter with the air of a public-awareness campaign yet proceed unaware of their cursory engagement and presumptuous comprehension of the issues at hand. Although they are politically impotent, to be fair, these socially conscious concepts are saved by their artful presentations.

What, then, is the most effective context for overt, socially responsible art? In the art-gallery Tegeder's project on crime and Keeler/Browder's attention to "sustainability" are rendered inert because the white cube is traditionally a place for reflection, not action. Anything placed within its walls, no matter how "cutting edge" those walls purport to be, will be relegated to the terms of "style," as in, this art is of a political style. The art gallery context, in effect, does not allow for these artists to maintain any sort of stance. The political-artist is reduced to being a casual observer where elsewhere his or her deeds might actually prove purposeful. In other words, political art is lazy politicking.

Dannielle Tegeder's exhibition about disappeared children and adults does not pretend to solve any mystery, nor does it make any pretense about its value to the real investigators of these criminal cases. It is rather a bit of theater that makes use of the signs and symbols of "the missing"—cork boards, colored pins in maps, blurry headshots—to prompt an investigation into the reception of such atrocities. Tegeder isn't so much interested in the actual victims as she is in their currency as fetish objects in the widespread culture. As a network of visual signifiers, the maps, beat-up station wagon and suburban garage are reminiscent of a crime drama but also add up to a superficial perception of a deeply sad issue, that of the mysteriously murdered.

Tegeder's research on this is not original, but it is poetic. The artist's crystalline structures of connectivity do not reflect a deep engagement with the subject, as she is obviously solely interested in the look and feel of the investigator's office. In this, we are led to believe that the faces of the missing and the clues to their whereabouts are supposed to prompt metaphoric analogy, but about what is anyone's guess. The exhibition reflects the stereotypical image of the kidnapper's lair like a movie set, thus making the subject fodder for a critical stance about how distanced we are from the actual crimes and how engaged we are with fictional crime dramas. But the inclusion of Thomas Tallis' seriously mournful 1559 choir composition "Lamentations" and dimmed lights makes the work seem like a memorial. As such, Tegeder has not taken the next step to push this created aura beyond mere stylization. The cultural implications or "metaphors" of the work are as absent as the missing children themselves. We know both child and artwork by description only, which is of course not a happy substitute for the real thing. As an alternative, I suggest using Adrian Holovaty's chicagocrime.org, a truly unique and useful harnessing of Google's maps program to report specific incidents of crime in Chicago.

Perhaps "Urban Warp/Weft" is more explicit in its stance as a dialogue rather than a solution, but isn't that always the case with the art exhibition? Stylistically, Browder and Keeler implement the topics of recycling and "green" design with a wit and casualness that can indeed lead to an acknowledgment of green issues. The artists have brought many potted plants and trees into the gallery space, cut a hole in the gallery's wall to reveal the trees outside and made a Minimalist painting from re-used paint. All of these objects or actions are specific responses to the specific institutional setting of Gallery 400. They ask us to consider our lives at home, in the office and in the city yet only and always point to their specific context within the gallery. As an antidote to such self-satisfying heroics, the artists have initiated a series of public-education lectures about light pollution, car-sharing and compositing. Yet when couched in the art-gallery setting, one must ask who the intended audience is. Why is the gallery, a space for critical reflection, the proper platform for urging action?

It is futile to argue for a re-definition of "art." If categorizing recycling or fitness or forensic science as performance art helps to get the job done, then I'm all for it. Of course, in the same light, overeating and sleeping in on a Saturday can also be an art and thus self-justified. Several of Browder and Keeler's "Failed Utopic Projects" include non-traditional landscaping, for instance planting a tree out of a third-story window. In the 1970s and 1980s artist Joseph Beuys and his son successfully planted 7,000 trees as an art project, yet Browder and Keeler can't seem to get a single one rooted. The predicament of socially responsible art is this: to be trendy does not equal being relevant.

*Dannielle Tegeder shows at Bodybuilder & Sportsman, 119 North Peoria, #2C, (312)492-7261, through June 16.
Amanda Browder and Stuart Keeler show at Gallery 400, 400 South Peoria, (312)996-6114, through June 2.*

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