

Wellesley, MA

"Re:Formations/Design Directions at the End of a Century"

Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College

A fully reusable exhibition announcement (printed on an ordinary manila file folder) and catalogue (with text on one side only of spiral-bound file

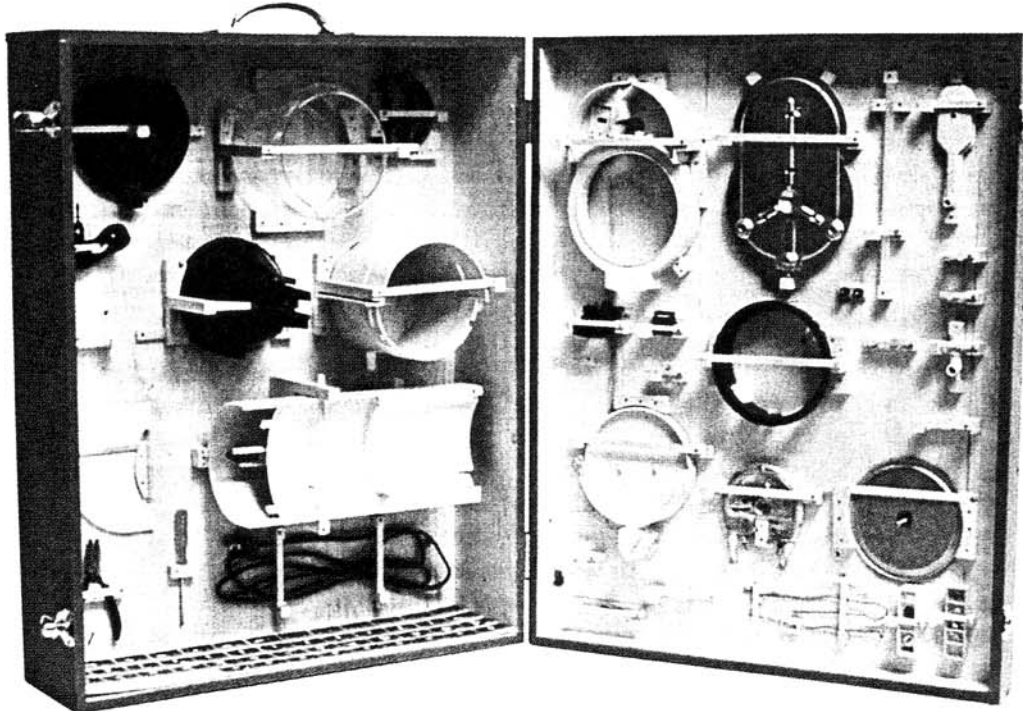
cards) were delightfully in sync with the artists featured in "Re:Formations/Design Directions at the End of a Century." Constantin Boym, Tunji Dada, Dan Peterman, Allan Wexler, Andrea Zittel and one collective, the Barbie Liberation Organization, all do inventive tinkering with ordinary objects.

Curator Judith Hoos Fox cites social responsibility, economic necessity and social commentary as a few of the motives behind the works in this small but focused show. What

Lloyd, Ann Wilson.
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structions on how to prepare these little gender-war bombs. In the BLO's version of a perfect world, G.I. Joe pipes, "Let's go shopping!" while Barbie growls, "Dead men tell no tales!"

Allan Wexler's large installation of reconfigured coffee makers, buckets and umbrellas is almost as entertaining. Though these are static objects, one can almost imagine their dizzy creator at work, an inventor-run-amok, sincerely turning



really invigorates the various works, however, is humor, ranging from general goofiness to sly sendup. The Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO) was represented by a faux-documentary video that was itself a sendup of television shows like *Hard Copy* and *A Current Affair*. This anonymous group of New York artists surreptitiously exchanged the mechanical voice boxes in talking Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls and then carefully repackaged and replaced them on toy store shelves. Real video clips of their toy store guerrilla actions, gleaned from those quasi-news shows that reported on them after receiving press releases from the group, were combined with footage of lab-coated BLO "technicians," giving step-by-step in-

Allan Wexler, *Braun "Aromaster" 10 Cup Coffeemaker*, 1991. Wood plastic, metal, glass and paper, 22 x 8 x 27½ in.

perfectly good products into more formalist equivalents of absurd, Rube Goldberg-esque contraptions. *Braun "Aromaster" 10 Cup Coffeemaker* (1991) is a serious-looking wooden case, precisely fitted with the plastic parts of a deconstructed electric coffee pot. His amorously fitted buckets, sprouting funnels and hoses, and *Umbrella Rain Catchers for Mitzpe Ramone, Israel* (1995), turned upside down and weighted with rocks, are strange and hapless sculptures merging the organic with the

mechanical. They seem obsessively intended to siphon every drop of a diminishing resource.

Constantin Boym's works, *Searstyle Furniture* (1992), *Recycle Series* (1988) and *The Cheapest Lamp Possible* (1944), are similar hybrids of conflicting design (in this case, high and low), combined with function. His aesthetic recalls the adaptable necessity of street people, as they mesh bits and pieces of junk into workable shelters and equipage. Like their grunge assemblages, Boym's furniture is alternately sleek and lumpy, with chairs of polished chrome frames topped by comfy bourgeois-style cushions of tufted brown vinyl; or Scandinavian-inspired laminated wood softened with corduroy "husband" bedrests. Boym both highlights and hastens the typical consumer mastication of high design concept into more practical middle-class comfort.

Andrea Zittel is also exploring the gulf between consumer taste and

cutting-edge design. She is represented here by a minimalist version of her familiar shelter modules, called *Carpet Furniture: Living Room with Entertainment Center* (1993). This rectangle of carpeting has schematic designs for furniture placement conveniently worked into the nap, taking the guesswork out of furniture arrangement, or substituting for it altogether. An accompanying bowl of Pringles potato chips serves as the perfect snack for the highly processed lifestyle she critiques. While the average consumer might very well see Zittel's work as vaguely practical, they would probably find Tunji Dada's redesigned, found clothing perplexing. However, Dada's work does make one consider how clothing has evolved over the years into an arbitrary blend of the functional and the archaic. His garments reassign functional elements to new roles—suspender braces become fasteners instead of supports—and turn convention upside down by making a skirt-bottom from what was once the standard men's trouser-top.

The work of Dada and Dan Peterman push the exhibition's premise to its opposite extremes of recycled design versus dysfunction/function, as opposed to the other works which delicately tread grounds of absurdity and wit between those opposing

poles. Dada's deconstructed-for-its-own-sake clothing is wearable, but awfully complicated. It leaves any presumed or subverted utility far behind in its quest for novelty and fashion. On the other hand, a display of Peterman's ultra-utilitarian, gray-green floor tiles of reprocessed plastic, *Ground Cover (1,725 tons)* (1995), would probably spark more interest at the local lumberyard. Leave off with the critical references to Carl Andre, I say. Get this stuff out of the gallery and into production.

—Ann Wilson Lloyd