

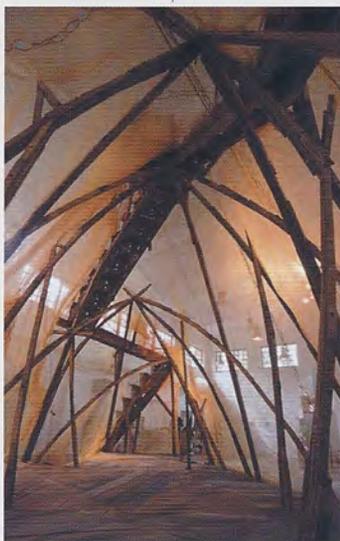
ISSUE FIVE
PLEASURE
FIVE POUNDS

Mark Harris: Enthusiastic for the humbler examples of American vernacular dwellings, SIMPARCH develop communal structures incorporating a wide range of materials and methods of assembly. These might be jury-rigged out of whatever is on hand like "Manufactured Home", 1996, the precarious desert house made of fallen sticks and sheer fabric [SIMPARCH: reclaimed plastic sheeting from double-wide home deliveries]; or they might be a bricolage of salvaged junk like "Rise Overrun", 1997, the Tatlinesque staircase of road signs, billboards and ladder; or perhaps constructed from prefabricated components like "Spec", 2001, the chill-out [S: WAS trying to be ANTI-CHILL-hard bench, no visuals-too many chill-out rooms in art] vaulted structure made from Drop Ceiling components, incorporating speakers [S: a killer system that includes 4 big woofers in the communal bench] for a sound work by Kevin Drumm. More recently, at Documenta 11, Simparch have shown "Free Basin", the perfect skateboarding facility [originally in Chicago in 2000], and in the last Whitney Biennial made a large outdoor [S: TANK-LIKE] room for projecting an experimental documentary by film/sound artist, Deborah Stratman). They are in London for a show at Tate Modern's Untitled Space.



Interview with SIMPARCH

Mark Harris



Mark Harris: So you met at a Jodorowsky retreat?

SIMPARCH: Who is that? New age, right?

Not exactly. He was a megalomaniacal director from the 70s with a taste for apocalyptic visions. El Topo was set in the desert. But I was wondering why Las Cruces is a good place to begin an art career?

Because of the "excess of scarcity"—like a witness-protection program, you had to make something from very little. Not our culture, so we saw things more clearly. Its still (relatively) the wild west. The western USA nostalgia, military presence, radiation, etc., kept us interested. There was a pioneering spirit

about it. We did not set out to make an artist group. It was a one-time experiment that built momentum.

Many American artists see labour as a central theme of their art. What do you like about work?

Metabolic activity is natural, the body wants it. Physical work is generally considered taboo in the western world. Marvin Minsky talked about the body as a "bag of meat" back in the 80s and now it has become that more than ever with the nature of work. That's too bad because I think it is both mental activity and the physical in unison that is the value in being human. We can't imagine not being physical. And the simp-projects bring the work into the realm of intense physical as well as mental stimulus with the problems we make for ourselves. And then, Christ, there's trying to deal with the concept, which is often agonizing for us—too much mental and we flat-line. In our work, materials and process are tangled up in the conceptual development of our work. As makers of a variety of things (sculpture, furniture, house fix-ups, what-nots) we see work as a necessary part of investigations of materials and design. We have often thought that labour is not a central theme of our work, but a central theme of our process. We like to work, but don't want that to be the subject of our work. The other content might get watered-down. Nauman says the real work of an artist is sitting there thinking in the studio. The physical work is sort of easy once you know what you're doing [if you believe in it]. That's the hard part, believing in this unknown territory.

The emphasis on leisure, or unproductive activity, in the installations suggests slowing

down time in a milieu where commerce accelerates it. These improvised-looking structures, accommodation perhaps for survivors or environmentalists, make me think of static time, as if they invite a withdrawal in the face of misguided notions of economic and social progress.

Ivan Illich, the liberation theologian and early critic of our misguided notions broke it down thirty years ago asked - what is quality of life? who's benefiting from these technophilic policies? Those and other important questions and analysis of development inspired environmental movements. In the



same vein of rationality and equity, Ben Nicholson, in his book *The World: Who Wants It?* suggests that the "what-I-wanters" be forced to confront their slash-and-burn mentality. How do we escape this conundrum of an over-productive world when the pan-capitalist ideology has us all locked down? Is leisure is an unproductive activity? Staying home is good, globe-trotting is bad. Laziness is a virtue and the homeless are saints. Providing alternatives to the misguided forces that shape the built environment is a goal for us. We love and hate contemporary phenomena like flimsy trailer homes, the internal combustion engine, cops shows on TV, and materials like medium density fiberboard and corrugated metal. We like to work from a post-apocalyptic



point of view. What can be made from the surplus of this excessive lifestyle? Your favourite ten science-fiction films featuring dysfunctional architecture? *Silent Running* (Biosphere II), *Soylent Green* (1970s Chicago), *Screamers* [Morphosis], 2001 [Atelier Van Lieshout], *Barbarella* (Bruce Goff), *Alien* (a burnt hospital), *Logan's Run* (MVRDV). Your Quonset Hut is similar to the Nissen Hut, a depressingly uncomfortable British dwelling that persists as railway architecture. What does this ugly, claustrophobic and anachronistic form offer you? Well, the sound room project, SPEC, was riffing on "dropping" the drop ceiling product as well as the great-lakes Indian longhouse as a communal building. People sat there together on the same bench to collectively listen to the composition-coming and going as they pleased. I think Commander Nissen may have been influenced by longhouses and decided they looked efficient so reproduce in modern materials for transportable troop habitation (I could be wrong on this). The vernacular of the longhouse made sense. They were made using saplings, sticks, and bark or hides for sheathing. Essentially woven or textile housing, they were malleable structures that worked in the region for the Native Americans. When you make this form-the barrel vault-out of steel, it becomes a bad idea for many

reasons. The thermal inhospitableness, I suppose, is the most notable flaw. But it was cheap, quickly erected, and easy to transport.

This goofy prefabricated building that was universally employed around the globe at the emergence of long-range warfare is very curious to us. With *Clean Livin'* it was conceptually important to make a livable space within the damaged landscape of a former military base. We restored the historic Quonset and developed the site to be "sustainable"—in sharp contrast to the original intention of this bombing range. It's the same with the factory homes, which were made for housing many people on the sites of large public work projects. Originally a quick housing solution to get the job done that becomes an industry and lifestyle. The highway system and vacation trailers, too, gave us something to think about in New Mexico, where these new vernaculars are so clear-cut.

What are your top ten Japanese industrial noise tracks? You into that? Bring the noise—hook us up. I used to listen to more noise around 1988. Merzbow was the guy. Akira, I think is his name, and he's still performing. We saw Merzbow at the Shirn museum in Frankfort in 2002 It was great. Me and Chris listen to



Wolf Eyes from Michigan. That's good 'ol American noise. They are really something special to see live. Their predecessors, Throbbing Gristle, SPK,



Lustmord, The Halfer Trio, all great experimental music from the U.K. Nobukazu Takemura and Fumiya Tanaka are a couple of composers I like but they are more techno-electronic than noise. When you were in India how did you communicate with each other effectively? You must mean Indiana, where Matt and Chris are from. Westerners go to India but we don't—though we are always on the lookout for all-you-can-eat India buffet. We have had "pow wows" in Indiana, but even then have never communicated effectively. We spend little time together as a group. This method encourages the installation period to be an exciting time when underdeveloped ideas sink or swim—"simparch always lands the plane". Oh right, Indiana...of course C9 Abel Gance said that Beethoven would have been a film director had he been born in the early twentieth century. Do you think that Kafka would have been an installation artist if he was beginning his career today? No, still a writer. He's too focused [intelligent?] to be an installation artist. He worked as a

bureaucrat or clerk of some sort, right? He could be said to be an "outsider" writer, maybe. I read his novel, "Amerika" last year because of that Kippenberger installation, "The Happy Ending of Franz Kafka's 'Amerika'". I don't know how he would deal with this world today. The current technocracy is insidious, unrelenting, and powerfully enforced. Kafka writing now, with the daily computer tyranny and the booming enforcement industry, would have lots of material to work with. Well, it's stories like "In the Penal Colony" with its machine that executes by inscription or the claustrophobic interiors of "The Castle" that might make you think of recent installation work—Mike Nelson for example. In your case you're associated with redeeming uninhabitable shelters located in uninhabitable parts of America. What's the relation between your urban lives and this attraction to survival in barren landscapes? It's easy to turn to JG Ballard, the patron saint of psychosis, as the best storyteller describing our current condition

and bizarre pursuits. I think we long for a time without so many conveniences and choices. We're sort of nostalgic but we're also looking for kicks. The far-away, forgotten places offer autonomy. When you don't have the amenities [cultural and otherwise] the deprivation can lead to sensory enhancement, motivating unimagined endeavors. Could lead to drink as well. With SIMPARCH, we combine the two - a quality pilsner being the primary lubricant. I can see you interested in Ballard's theme of human adaptation to extreme climate change or to encounters with technology that you find in "The Drowned World" or "Crash". What about his 90s annotations to the earlier "The Atrocity Exhibition"? He talks about the Salt Flats there. Not familiar with the new edition [but will find it]. Virilio and Baudrillard have commented on the great salt basin and the strange human pursuits that go on there. I can imagine Ballard's comments. There's a story of his about a man alone, living amongst the nuclear-testing ruins on one of

the bikini islands. He's out of his mind wandering around in this landscape with its rows and rows of Judd-like concrete structures. It's a stunning narrative highlighting the calculated havoc that man has wrought in the name of progress - awesome installations, though. Meyerhold felt that the theatre had to enable spectators to conquer the apathy, hypocrisy, erotomania and pessimism within themselves. Are there equivalent tasks for installation today? Probably C9 in the sci-fi novella, Triton, by Samuel Delaney, there's an elaborate installation art piece that destroys itself within a few minutes, also a "micro-theater" work performed for one (unaware) person who is surreptitiously given a drug beforehand by one of the performers (a perception-enhancer). It's quite an experience for the guy-a life changer. Work by Catherine Sullivan, Joan Jonas or Marina Abramovic is intense, extreme, transgressive - without the drugs. Have you heard the insight, "no art better than sex, no sex better than drugs"? You seem interested in the obsolescence of landscape and housing where economic and military demands impact on rural and urban locations. How does your attraction for discarded materials and sites relate to this? We like to look at discarded materials as natural resources. A pile of junk has a



certain purity to it and wants to be appreciated. It is like rescuing a hurt dog. These sites offer autonomy. They are considered wasteland or forgotten, so you can do what you like without being bothered. There's rich history in this obsolescence—human ingenuity and failure. The Center For Land Use Interpretation brings to light the histories of these forgotten places and it's fascinating. Could you say something about Hell's Trailer, that early project of yours? Is this a prototype, a one-off event, a vehicle that you might get back on the road someday? Are the other projects reconstructable or would you always want to be moving on? Yes, we would like to see it "on the road" again—because it rocks. Free storage is great but it deserves to be seen again—only exhibited 3 times in three dusty New Mexico towns, a pity that. Free Basin has been exhibited 5 times so we are fairly well ready to retire it. Other pieces are more ephemeral so there's no great interest in redoing them—did Manufactured Home three times. Could do variations on things but don't see it as too interesting. Remixing SPEC would be good. People ask about that one sometimes. 500 tiles in storage, so, could do someday. Hell's Trailer only looks like it could be towed by a car. Fact is it is built more like a rocking chair with salvaged spare tires just for effect. We talk about reconfiguring pieces, but have not done it so much. Ten favorite comedians? Lenny Bruce, Andy Kaufmann, David Cross, Jonathan Winters, Carlin, Beefheart/Zappa, Bill Hicks, Richard Pryor [set hair afire whilst free-basing - and then did a routine about it] How did John Peel's death affect you personally? Much more so than

John Kennedy's passing did. British pop/rock/experimental music has been inspiring to all the members of SIMPARCH....he never got old did he? Peel unifies a diverse group of tastes. Some simps like Wire, some simps like Current 93 or Nurse With Wound, while others like blues rock like Ten Years After and the like. His career included that range of music, didn't it? There has been talk of a project that reflects more of our music interests, but we have not figured out how. What was Kevin Drumm's music like? How did it change the way you thought of SPEC functioning?

Kevin's music is heavy and delicate, non rhythmic, and makes use of a wide frequency range. His composition, Turning Point (from Shear Hellish Miasma), is like being trapped in a big steel drum with a hundred tweeking smurfs crawling around the outside manically beating and scraping on it. It just keeps getting worse but you love the pain. "Death-metal" seems jangly and light-hearted in comparison. That's one of my favorites, listen to it loud enough, you levitate. But, his sonic range is vast. You can find grindingly industrial noise, incidental electro-acoustic rattlings, and gentle/ethereal meanderings all on the same record. Sound can be an incredible, cathartic medium and he does it well.

The point of SPEC was to take have cinema-quality sound without the visuals and to give Drumm's composition, with its wide frequency range, a proper listening space. The contrast of the gallery and the room was dramatic. Aurally, the room was cozy compared to the echoing gallery. It was long, too, so people had to spend a certain time just to get through it, which was all part

of an attempt to keep them there — listening. Are these projects nothing if they aren't used? Making them seems one kind of event for you, but how is your experience of them transformed by visitors and users? It's a thrill to see people involved with a piece in a physical way. That was always our intention to get people on the piece—not just in the room with the piece. We want to please, to be generous—the physical and mental thing again. There's a way in which the art organizations, galleries and museums serve to make visible these projects of yours which would otherwise rest happily on the edge of a commune or music festival, unredeemed as art. Can you say something about the relation between art institutions and these structures or events that you facilitate? Institutions want new interesting things, but it gets sticky with making the actual thing, sometimes this will be more of an issue [or less?] with the Mexico project - negotiating the situation down there. We do things different, the hard way for one. Maybe that is the difference. We want to tweak things to make a difference. In some ways a work that stands on its own outside any context is best. But, is that really possible? Sometimes it is just solving practical matters. Problems occur with liability risks, size, and sonic intrusions. So what are you up to in Mexico? We were invited by InSite, an organization that invites artists to do projects at the US/Mexico border. For that, we are taking on the issue of water purity. It may be a more social than sculptural project. We will use low-tech solar principles to purify water in a colonia, or squatter community. For these informal communities water, let

alone clean water is very hard to come by. Self-organizing and beyond planning, these communities are the "spontaneous architects of our postmodern future" and we thought it would be interesting to engage with one them. They somehow exist beyond catastrophe with an order beyond comprehension for most people in the United States. We will make some hybrid between pure function (devices for making drinking water) and a more opulent installation in a public plaza near the border on the pedestrian path. The solar stills will then be moved to the colonia after the exhibit to produce drinkable water that will be much purer than the US's carefully-treated recycled toilet flush. We're looking forward to that one — should be full of adventure. You play on the edge of your discipline and seem as though you might be happy at times for your projects to slip away from art into functional design. What does the context of art exhibitions and site projects enable that a straightforward design or architectural production doesn't? For a work to be useful and practical is good but we also want it to remain art, i.e. synthesis and expression. We're sort of back-yard futurists in that we remix current materials and we are hardware junkies and we like sound and would choose specific structures over general ones. The art viewing audience is interesting to us. Art viewers are likely to be looking to think about things in a new way. The idea of practicality seems limiting. That is not to say that our works are free from practicality. Our function is either symbolic, or specific to that particular piece or venue. If we could have a stable venue or

situation, that might be even better than the art world. The Center For Land Use Interpretation serves this function for us already. We've worked on their residency facility out in Utah and we created a new live-work place (Clean Livin') last year out there. They are into our work and we like the fact that a variety of people really use what we've built. Site-specific installation is where we all meet as simpes. So occasionally these structures become symbolic retreats that have a ceremonious function over a brief period of time. If that isn't to be the sum of their reality how do they reverberate in everyday tactics and space use? The art world can exist as a model where ideas can be tested—Ben Nicholson says that Museums hold on to progressive ideas until they are no longer a threat to the world. We hope to influence the field, up the ante. We're into reverb—will resurrect El Tubo Completo in the desert north of LA this year we hope. Do you notice responses to the work varying from one location to another? I imagine a big difference between urban and wilderness audiences. The audiences are all art audiences. The wilderness has been a community of academics in a southwestern USA art school in an agriculture town (Las Cruces); it is more casual, but an art audience. Same with the audience in Wendover, Utah. It is a "wilderness" venue, but the audience largely comes from Los Angeles. We are weirdos to the locals—Wendover, Utah or Madison avenue. Free Basin was interacted with in a very different way in Kassel than in Columbus. The skaters were unfamiliar with the California pool, and there the non-skating viewers jumped

right in to the bowl to experience it. **What do you think is behind the current wave of enthusiasm for relational art, especially in Europe? Besides being a function of new utopian strategies it seems an effective way for commerce to bring new practices to the marketplace.**

That's a good point. Yes, this dialogue/interplay with the market—always there, but more cozy than ever. Is it true that there might be a larger group of artists without a warehouse of physical works? To have an experience presented and remembered is good. Wasn't relational art practice born out of a slow moving art-market? Are we still there? It has to be the expanding service economy that is fueling the art market sector. One assumes by definition that relational art would be a critique of that economy but it certainly isn't consistently so. I think most of its practitioners had slogged their way through the 90s. Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija for example. But it was Bourriaud who brought the disparate artists together under one grouping. Certainly post-technology crash, and of course 9/11, so there may be different kinds of market inflexion involved. Perhaps there's something similar going on as in the early-90s when the shift in commitment from bombast to issue-based practices seemed both to open up new markets and atone for the indulgences of the previous decade. Of course you seem to be presenting an alternative value system within one of the most ruthlessly speculative contemporary marketplaces. One position might be that the relational seeks to make up for a failure of sensitivity within our social institutions. It seeks community at a time of

polarization and tries to inject humanity into communities - understanding of the fact that everyone has the same basic needs and all the rest is ego, greed and other "sins". Art needs to arbitrate cultural pathologies more now than ever because things are really fucked up. **You're involved, or have been involved in teaching. I'm thinking how schizophrenic that must be. One minute talking about investment moulds and the next heading off to Kassell. What would a young undergrad get out of a show like Documenta? Documentas are intense nodes of interpretation—compelling surveys of what's been going on with art and the world. Documenta 11 was a challenging exhibition and Okwui Enwezor and his merry troop of co-curators did an incredible job. There were also the 4 non-visual Platforms which gathered the cultural sages together to speak at four different seminars in four different countries. Books were published that recorded these events. The magnitude was exhausting and it was intellectually taxing so it took a certain investment. It was hugely satisfying, as well. Every grad should be aware of it and look at the catalogues. There's a big difference between a Documenta and a Whitney [and a Venice, I assume]. Each has its own intent and flavor. **Top 10 forgotten artists? Mary Miss, Alice Aycock, Manzoni, Immi Knoebel, Mr. Otis, JIG DOG RAMPAGE, Favorite tactics of disruption? Income tax evasion, stay in bed, Most effectively antagonistic historical art strategies? Performance/pranks by the Yes Men — particularly their attempt at Republican "identity correction" with the fake****

campaigning for Bush. Who was that artist who became the mayor of Rosendale, NY? **SIMPARCH favourite reality shows? The Great Race, Midnight Woodworker, Old Van Makeover, Trading Toilets, Autobabblers, and American Chompers. Your UK favorites? The Fall, The Mekons, Luke Vibert, Gang of Four, XTC, PIL, Cabaret Voltaire, Scanner, Plasticman.**

IMAGES

Page 76 (top)
Deutsche Juggernaut (DJ Berg)
1998
20' x 35' x 20'
salvaged wood,
wheels, netting

Page 76 (bottom)
Clean Livin'
2003
A collaborative project
in conjunction with
the Center for Land
Use and Interpretation
Wendover, Utah

Page 77
Free Basin
2000
20' x 40' x 50' gallery,
plywood, concrete,
steel, skateboarders

Page 78
Hell's Trailer
1996
8' x 12' x 6'
billboards, wood,
upholstery, hardware

Page 79
Rise Overrun
1997
20' x 50' x 50',
wood, hardware,
billboards,
plastic sheeting,
plastic twine,
grommets,
road signs