

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2005

ART

THE BUILDERS

Art That Requires A Hard Hat

IN the contemporary art world, there's practically nothing that can't be used to get the job done. In recent years, artists have employed everything from plasticized salt to fingernail clippings to gallons of water from the Bermuda Triangle. Even DNA. (Joe Davis, a biological artist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has encoded a fragment of text by Heraclitus into a gene of a fruit fly.)

But over the last year in New York, artists increasingly needed something else: a good structural engineer. It was the year of hard-hat art.

Besides the most publicized example — "The Gates" by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in Central Park, 23 meandering miles worth of nuts, bolts, steel plates, fabric and PVC tubing — there was also Robert Smithson's long-envisioned "Floating Island to Travel Around Manhattan Island," which involved building an island from scratch, complete with 10 trees, 3 huge rocks, a bunch of shrubs and tons of dirt. For a week the project turned a boatyard on Staten Island into what looked like a convention for the Army Corps of Engineers.

Pierre Huyghe, the French artist, also descended on Central Park with a construction team worthy of a Peter Jackson epic. In October, he took over Wollman Rink to stage an elaborate art "musical" — emphasis on the quote marks — whose set involved looming rock-concert floodlight towers and huge jet-black glaciers made from Styrofoam. Mr. Huyghe, who usually maintains the mondaine cool of a good Parisian, was practically giddy as he watched tool-belted workers swarm over the rink at his beck and call. "I am quite enjoying this," he said.

If you want to see another piece of heavy-lifting construction art that is still around, at least through Jan. 22, visit the Whitney Museum's Altria gallery at Park Avenue and 42nd Street, where the Brooklyn-based artist Rob Fischer has filled the space with works that revolve around ideas of building and demolishing.

The centerpiece — its title, "Your vigor for life appalls me," is borrowed from R. Crumb — is a 35-foot tower made from what appear to be closets and hallways, all held together with scaffolding and clamps. (An engineer had to sign off on the structural stability of the piece.)

Shamim M. Momin, the branch director of the Altria space, recalled that during the three weeks it took to assemble the installation, she and the artist changed their minds about the placement of another piece, a 3,500-pound Dumpster that has been balanced on its end and covered with mirrors. One of the Whitney's head art handlers, Filippo Gentile, looked at her in disbelief and told her he needed five minutes to walk outside and be alone, she said.

"But then he came back in completely calm and said, 'O.K., where do you want it?'"

RANDY KENNEDY

