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## [Issue 48](#) September-October 1999

### Stuff

TBA Exhibition Space, [Chicago, USA](#)

Stuff is everywhere and is everything. In Western cultures it includes geography, nature and other human beings, but has no inherent value other than the value we assign it. Heidegger refers to it as 'stock' or 'standing reserve', matter which exists exclusively for our own consumption.

Curated by artist Jeanne Dunning and art critic Jim Yood, the exhibition's intention is to look at the intimate physical and psychological relationships artists have with material things. The paper cups, paint scrapings, pompoms and expanding foam that litter the show opt to evoke presence, invention and palpability and leave language to grapple with issues of legitimation, reproduction and hyper-reality.

Since no one can escape 'stuff' in a free market economy, it is up to each individual to establish responsibility for the things we have and make. From the respectful to the exploitative, the exhibition's 18 artists embrace varied degrees of accountability toward rubbish, food products, craft supplies and human detritus. Yet in the end, all of these manipulated and recycled substances are homogenised into art products.

Convinced that art should spring from both resourcefulness and the commonplace, Joe Scanlan's *Potting Soil* (1989-1991) reveals a literal approach conspicuously missing from art production a decade ago. His coffee grounds, sawdust and egg shells composted in a disposable shopping bag as planting

medium avows a rigorous new-use policy to the by-products of consumption. Laurie Palmer's *Roses* (1999), an accumulation of fragrant autumn leaves stuffed into large bags of brown Lycra are a sensuous alternative to fibre insulation. As everyone with a garden knows, its waste has always posed a dilemma with its unmanageable bulk and labour intensive use-value as mulch. Lacking the patience, Scanlan demonstrates when making soil, Palmer's oversized pillows side with the 'waste not, want not' ethical minority.

Mystified by the fact that real (albeit insignificant) objects can materialise from thin air, Tom Friedman's *Dustball* (1994) reveals wonder in the unnoteworthy - as if bubble gum, toothpicks and sharpened pencils hold the key to understanding the human condition. But while Friedman extrapolates profundities from the crap he has lying around his house, Sarah Gjertson shops for thousands of hand-painted false fingernails and gallons of liquid make-up to heighten our cultural obsession with the superficial. Ted Griscom and Danielle Gustafson-Sundell invent new types of domestic cosmetics, decorating window ledges, bricks and kitchen tools with perky little pom-poms, gooey marshmallow fluff, paint, bubble wrap and sponges.

Painting is not without its place in the world of lascivious substances. David Kaiser and Michelle Fierro both arrive at abstraction by fleecing paint's own plastic nature. Subjecting paint skins, palette scrapings and suspended drips and splatters to rigorous compositional order on the traditional rectangle, the artists coagulate the inchoate medium of paint. Carl Ostendarp's *Want Ads* (1992) and Andrew Moore's *Fat Body* (1998) bloat painting's two-dimensional character into sculpture with installation foam, striking a line between Minimalism and corporeal volume.

Shirley Tse's *She's Got Air* (1996) and Shuko Wada's *Clear Tape* (1999) may use simple materials - plastic grocery bags and clear packing tape - but the essential elements of their sculptures are contour, mass, light, repetition and balance. Yet the most successful discussion of 'stuff' and its relationship to art and the everyday is Patrick Miceli's *Other* (1999). Spilling out of a gallery storage room, a seemingly endless mound of fast food drinking cups choked the exhibition space and stifled the work around it. A heap of advertising beauty with imposing formal presence, the piece celebrates the fodder of Capitalism in full glory. No critique. No irony. Just a proportionate sampling of the never-ending refuse from the fast-food giants - giants who put a great deal of effort into designing disposable cups with spectacular graphic and gimmick appeal.

Whether it's harvesting dustballs from under beds, hair from bathroom drains or paper cups from dumpsters, many artists have taken on the role of rescuing stuff from the everyday and reframing it as art. Another relevant example of this literal attitude was apparent in Chicago this spring with hotel and apartment shows feverishly springing up throughout the city: 'Perfect Sleeper', 'Locked Groove', 'Smart Living', 'Hot Sauce' and a host of others were little more than excuses to throw a party during 'Art Chicago 1999'. But because art and stuff have become acceptably pseudonymous, hotel bathrooms, back porches and kitchen sinks became logical sites for art production. The prolific, casual and apolitical nature of these ad hoc exhibitions marks a point where art and stuff have become truly interchangeable.

**Michelle Grabner**

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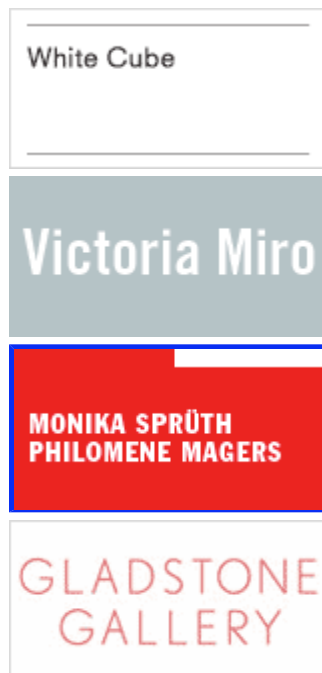
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