

The New York Times

July 25, 2004

The New Museum's New Non-Museum

By RANDY KENNEDY

WHAT does a museum do when it suddenly finds itself without a museum to live in?

If it is the Museum of Modern Art, which has been homeless during its \$850 million renovation on West 53rd Street, the answer is the art-world equivalent of an expensive New York real estate shuffle: purchase an apartment while your town house is being gutted. In the Modern's case, of course, the apartment was very pricey: it cost almost \$30 million to buy and convert a former staple factory in Queens into an exhibition space to use for only a couple of years.

So when the New Museum of Contemporary Art decided in 2001 to pack up its home of 21 years on Broadway and board the art bus rolling out of SoHo, a temporary pied-à-terre was out of the question. It simply could not afford one it considered acceptable. Its yearly budget is less than \$4 million, and the new home, designed by Kazuyo Sejima & Ryue Nishizawa of the Tokyo firm Sanaa, that it plans to open on the Bowery in 2006 will cost \$35 million, not that much more than the Modern spent on its outer-borough outpost alone.

But as the New Museum pondered the best ways to exist without walls for more than two years, money was not the most important factor, said Lisa Phillips, its director. More crucial were questions about the identity of the museum itself. Founded by Marcia Tucker in 1977 in rented office space on Hudson

Street after she was forced out as a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the New Museum's radical mission was to question the whole idea of the museum. What should one be? Should one be? And if so, what kinds of art qualified as "museum-quality" art?

"I wanted to see if this museum could provide a model for an institution to work that wasn't institutional," said Ms. Tucker — who decreed, for example, that all full-time staff workers, including herself, would receive the same salary, that decisions would be made (at least in theory) democratically, that there would be no permanent collection, that more contact between artists and visitors would be encouraged and that accepted boundaries between art and life would be attacked at every turn. Her motto, she said, was "act first and think later, so you actually have something to think about."

Over the next two decades, she tried hard to live up to the motto, in the process helping to redefine the role of the museum even as the New Museum's own shows were sometimes ridiculed, sometimes actively loathed. (Enraged viewers threw trash cans through the plate-glass windows of one infamous show that included do-it-yourself flag-burning kits.)

In the 1980's, the museum put together shows that examined the pressing problems right outside its own doors, like AIDS and — appropriately for the museum's situation now — homelessness. It also explored how some artists make their lives into art, the kind that does not fit into museums: one show described the "work" of the artist Tehching Hsieh, who lived outdoors for an

entire year, during which time he vowed not to "look at, make, read about, or talk about art, or enter a museum or gallery."

As the museum aged and Ms. Tucker stepped down in 1999, the museum's iconoclasm waned, perhaps necessarily. In 2000, it accepted its first corporate donation of artworks. It is now considering the once-heretical idea of maintaining a permanent collection, and its most recent fund-raiser was held at Cipriani 42nd Street, the



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

The New Museum, temporarily homeless, has turned to outdoor art: Julianne Swartz's periscope-and-telephone installation "Can You Hear Me?" at the Sunshine Hotel.

cavernous mess hall of the well-heeled.

But Ms. Phillips said that she and the museum's curators were still acutely aware of the need to use the transition to the new building as an opportunity to think again about the definition of the museum. And so, while it has taken 7,000 square feet of space on the first floor of the Chelsea Art Museum on West 22nd Street for a year, its curators decided that the first major show would not be within walls, but outside them.

Called "Counter Culture," the show, which remains in place until Aug. 14, features five works that visitors will be able to find, if they are somewhat intrepid, on or around the stretch of the Bowery where the new New Museum will rise on what is now a parking lot.

One work, by Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga, will be installed in an alley behind the site. Another, by a group called Flux Factory, invites viewers to enter a martial-arts supply store, walk up to the counter and say a special password, "Gert Frobe," to gain access to a part of the store usually off limits to the public. (For non-James Bond fans, Gert Frobe is the name of the actor who played Goldfinger; Flux Factory uses its "installation" to imagine a kind of alternate Bowery history involving espionage and intrigue instead of flophouses and gin mills.)

Julianne Swartz, whose work was recently in the Whitney Biennial, built a bright yellow conduit of plastic pipe that stretches up the side of the Sunshine Hotel, one of the Bowery's last flophouses, which will be the museum's odd next-door neighbor. The conduit, outfitted with mirrors, allows passersby to peek into the hotel's lounge area, and gives the residents themselves, all men and some very isolated and lonely, a chance to engage in conversation with those below (echoey but intimate, in a tin-can telephone way) if they want to.

Another artist, Marion Wilson, has bartered with residents of the Bowery Mission, an organization for the homeless that is just down

the street from the hotel, and has incorporated items donated or sold to her by some of the men there — a faded T-shirt, locks of dreadlocked hair, a bright religious drawing — into her own artwork, which she is selling from a cheery, flower-festooned cart she has begun pushing around the neighborhood like a hot-dog vendor. Not long after she started, she even took on one of the mission's residents as a helper and, in exchange for his work, she is using some of her profits to help him meet his child-support payments.

After a recent church service at the mission, followed by a fried-chicken lunch, Ms. Wilson said she was intrigued from the beginning by the thought of a no-walls show and had even figured out a way to store her art after hours, with no museum nearby to help her.

"The attendant for the parking lot has been very nice, and he says he'll keep it in his booth overnight," she said, explaining that she sees many parallels between her work and the nomadic state of the museum itself.

"I'm like a store without walls," she said. "And I'm going to be very transient, the way the museum is now."

In some ways, the show harks back to a braver world of urban art in New York City in the 1970's, when the museum really was new — for example, to the guerrilla works done by Gordon Matta-Clark, the most famous of which landed him in legal trouble after he sealed off an abandoned Hudson River pier and cut crescent shapes into the walls of a warehouse he did not own. It also brings to mind the dances that Joan Jonas choreographed and filmed amid landfill piles that were later to become part of Battery Park City.

But the New Museum's show is guerrilla art in only the nicest, new-millennium sense. The show's organizer, Melanie Cohn, said that the museum planned to spray-paint a logo near the site of each work, to make them easier for visitors to find. "But it's going to be temporary paint," she said. "We want people to be able to wash it off."

The show is not intended to be confrontational or to underscore the area's disintegration. In fact, it is trying to do the opposite: to say hello to a neighborhood that is rapidly changing from skid row to a row of condos and bars, a gentrification that will be speeded by the museum's arrival there. And the intention is also, while exploring a museum without walls, to introduce its visitors to their new destination.

"Otherwise," Ms. Cohn said, "people really have no reason to go down there and look at a parking lot. But it challenges us to do this, and it also challenges the people who go to see it. In a museum it's easy. But out in the world you think: 'Am I going to be able to find it? What am I supposed to do when I find it? Am I trespassing?' You don't know."

Ms. Phillips, during an interview at a coffee shop near the new site, said the museum's staff had been inspired to do the show in part by the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, which was forced to think on its feet when it found a virulent mold in its new building in 2002 and had to close for repairs. Its way of keeping itself alive in the interim was to allow curators at other Swedish museums to dip into its collections and stage shows around the country using its works. It also opened a temporary space in an old post office near a train station and held exhibits that lasted only two weeks.

"We knew we weren't MoMA and we weren't going to go that route, but we very much wanted to keep our presence alive in the city," she said, mentioning the Morgan Library, which decided last year to close completely until expansion is completed in 2006, with very little programming until it reopens.

"Willingness to embrace risk and uncertainty is a positive thing," she said. "And it's especially good for us."

Whether it will be good for longtime visitors to the New Museum or for the Bowery remains to be seen, as art lovers begin to trek eastward, with maps in their hands, and the residents of the Sunshine Hotel await them. Bruce Davis, who has been living in the hotel for many years, said he is keeping an open mind about Ms. Swartz's low-tech communications conduit.

"I couldn't see any reason for it at first," he said the other day, rolling a cigarette in the sparse hotel lounge, as a fan labored weakly against the heat. "Then I realized it must be for some kind of artistic touch."

James Carrow, the hotel's manager, said the residents ignored the bright-yellow contraption at first. But in the first week after it was installed, they slowly began to wander over, stick their heads inside the bell-shaped end of the tube and respond to the strangers, mostly tourists and teenagers, calling up to them.

"I'm surprised people are that curious about us up here," Mr. Carrow said, shaking his head. "But you never know what people are going to like nowadays."