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THOSE STICKS, THE UP
RIGHTS IN THE WATER,
WHAT ARE THEY?
Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle (with Mark Hereld and Rick Gribenas): Random Sky, 2006, live digital output, single channel on 10 screens, weather transmitter, surround sound; at the Hyde Park Art Center. Photo Tom Van Eynde. All venues this article Chicago.

View of the interior of James Turrell's Skyscape observatory, commissioned by the University of Illinois at Chicago, for the Earl L. Nau Plaza. Photo Roberta Dupuis-Declin/UIC Photo Service.
Contemporary art (and architecture) in Chicago has gained a lively momentum with the recent opening, and revamped mission, of the new Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC). In late spring, HPAC, one of the city’s longest-running alternative spaces—it was founded in 1939—moved from the last of its several previous locations (a former ballroom in what was once the Del Prado Hotel) to a new site just a few blocks away, in the same South Side neighborhood of Hyde Park. Architect Douglass Garofalo’s innovative reconstruction of the two-story masonry warehouse, owned by the University of Chicago, that is now HPAC’s permanent home provides compelling reason to reflect upon the state of art here, including, in addition to several important initiatives, the city’s venerable institutions.

The Hyde Park Art Center
HPAC has made significant contributions to Chicago’s cultural history, most notably by launching the careers of the Chicago Imagists in the 1960s and 70s. Its more recent contributions have come under the leadership of Chuck Thurow, executive director since 1998 and previously the board’s CEO. The exhibition program was given a fresh infusion by former exhibition director Annie Morse and now by Allison Peters, who took the post in 2004. Past highlights include a series of architectural interventions: U7 (2003) by Patrick McGee, Cold Comfort (2001) by Karen Reimer and Constance Bacon, and Free Basin (2000) by Simparch (the collaborative duo of Steve Badgett and Matthew Lynch), the latter of whom constructed a monumental plywood skate bowl within the gallery, hosting skateboarders throughout its duration. This varied history was the subject of “For Real” (2006), the final show in the Del Prado building, guest curated by Bill Brown. In an investigation of HPAC’s role as a presenter of art, and of art as a form of institutional critique, the offices were relocated to the exhibition gallery, while works in various mediums, created by the collective Cream Co., occupied the administrative spaces.

A similar sense of engagement was at the heart of “Takeover” [Apr. 24-June 11, 2006], the new HPAC’s inaugural show. Thirty-nine artists who are Chicago-based or whose careers have significant ties to the city created site-specific or site-responsive works that engaged Garofalo’s inspired renovation, the architect’s largest project to date. His previous undertakings include several adventurous residential, commercial and institutional buildings in the Midwest, as well as various theoretical proposals for urban design, all united by his use of digital fabrication techniques and an emphasis on environmental sensitivity. Garofalo’s portfolio also includes exhibition design, artistic collaboration and such public works as “Between the Museum and the City” (2003), a series of temporary structures conceived for the front plaza of Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art, to house educational programs and events.

The Chicago-based Garofalo, increasingly a figure of international acclaim, also added 1,200 square feet to his HPAC design, whose interior and exterior he conceived as a series of flowing rectangles. In keeping with HPAC’s community focus, permeability and accessibility are key concepts throughout the building, from its street-level entry and forecourt to its large horizontal windows, no-frills construction materials and mutable internal spaces.

For the inaugural show, works were situated throughout the 32,000-square-foot facility—still incomplete at the time of the show’s opening—which includes five formal exhibition spaces as well as classrooms, studios, offices, a resource center and a café. The construction delay unfortunately compromised projects by Kerry James Marshall, Denenge Akpem and Scott Woliak, among others; nonetheless, “Takeover” afforded a rare opportunity to witness the building unfold throughout the exhibition’s run.

Works by Nina Levy, known for her self-referential sculptures, and Mindy Rose Schwartz, also a sculptor, lent a dramatic, whimsical presence to the main thoroughfare just off the entrance. In Drop, a flattened likeness of Levy’s head appeared to have fallen on the floor; above, the sculpture of a small child (presum-
For “Takeover,” HPAC’s inaugural show, 39 Chicago-related artists created site-responsive works that sought to engage architect Douglas Garofalo’s inspired renovation.

View of Nick Cave’s “Soundsuits,” 2006; at the Chicago Cultural Center.

ably a representation of the artist’s son) leaned, arms extended, over the upstairs railing. Nearby, Schwartz’s anomalous collection of synthetic and found materials (twigs, beads, artificial flowers) hung like a chandelier from the ceiling. Baroque and oddly lush, Schwartz’s Pushing Up the Daisies contrasted with the more minimalist, Zen-like purity of Jacob Hashimoto’s installation White Phases—Superabundant Variation, a series of wood and white-silk orbs strung in loose columns and suspended in the grand exhibition hall.

Although the entire building, with its reusable surfaces and movable interior walls, was conceived to showcase art, this 2,400-square-foot hall, open and spacious, serves as the main exhibition venue. Five roll-up metal doors open the gallery to the street and form the lower outside east wall; two were transformed into screens for Alison Ruttan’s two-channel video projection Transmission, in which passers-by, solicited by the artist, were filmed strolling along the front sidewalk.

On the opposite wall, Adeleheid Mers created an ink-jet printed “organogram,” or organizational chart, of HPAC. Vibrantly colored silhouettes and floral and geometric patterns, symbols for the gallery’s various constituents and members, intersect to form an organic whole. In Look Out (Up and to the Right), Kay Rosen also painted a portrait of HPAC as a hub for diverse artistic interactions, though not without an ironic twist. Here, the word LOCUS, rendered in green sans-serif type, was painted on the south wall, while the letter T hovered above the door.

Several works addressed the larger political and geographic spaces of Hyde Park, a diverse community that encompasses both affluent and low-income residential areas, as well as the University of Chicago. Dan S. Wang’s suite of 16 text-based works on paper (collages, found signage, bits of ephemera and original graphics) comment on politics, race and war, as well as issues specifically germane to the local community. Joan Livingstone’s Re/Site, a patchwork installation combining the artist’s signature fragments of felt, cloth, vinyl and other soft materials with digital photos, junk-food wrappers and found/redeemted debris, mines the social and material culture of the immediate environs.

Re/Site was installed horizontally along one wall of the main corridor that divides the lower-level galleries from approximately 11,000 square feet of teaching studios and classrooms for HPAC’s on-site student program. Garofalo’s well thought out plan devotes equal attention to the needs of exhibition and educational programs, while creating open, less-defined spaces for potential exchanges between the two.

Julia Fish’s subtle intervention guided visitors between the first and second floors. A series of small aluminum bars painted red, yellow and blue were placed at measured intervals along, as a portion of the title states, “fifty-nine steps/seven flights/three stairways.” Upstairs one finds administrative offices, additional galleries, a digital arts lab and seven studios, four of which are reserved for University of Chicago art faculty—currently Tania Bruguera, Laura Letin, Joan Livingstone’s Random Sky, Iriigo Manglano-Ovalle and David Schutte.

The building is still owned by the university and provided to HPAC rent free. The institutions are collaborating on an international artist residency program to be launched in 2007.

Strong multimedia installations by M.W. Burns, by Anne Wilson and Shawn Decker working together; and by Manglano-Ovalle confirmed HPAC’s commitment to supporting new and experimental art forms. The hallmark of Garofalo’s design is the glass-and-steel digital facade that cantilevers out from the preexisting structure. The 80-foot-long, 12-foot-high facade serves as an additional exhibition area, visible from the outside and accessed from the inside by a catwalk that bridges the offices and second-floor gallery. According to Garofalo, who is known for his architectural advances with digital technologies, this high-tech platform is “equipped with an integrated system of digital projection screens, scrims, and shades” that can display up to 7 million pixels, and is easily adapted to fit individual projects’ needs.1

For “Takeover,” Manglano-Ovalle, along with science/technology engineer Mark Hereld and artist Rick Gribenas, transformed the facade into a wall of alternating blue and white vertical bands. This seemingly abstract composition, titled Random Sky and purposely reminiscent of Daniel Buren, was actually scripted by live weather information taken from a weather station attached to the front of the building, then digitally projected onto it. Viewed at night, Random Sky also became interactive from another source, as viewers’ silhouettes were traced on its glowing surface, creating an environment that theatrically merged exterior and interior spaces.

Part of HPAC’s renewed mandate is to create connections among Chicago artists and those working elsewhere. Subsequent exhibitions organized by guest curators have placed Chicago-based artists within broader thematic contexts and also included international rosters. For example, the participatory “Home of the Free,” curated by Jens Hoffman, investigated alternative definitions of freedom. The more confrontational “Ruby Satellite,” curated by California-based Ciara Ennis, explored themes of authority and social control.

Other exhibitions focus on emerging artists or those deserving of greater recognition, like Shane Huffman and Max King Cap [whose show opens Jan. 25]. The ambitious, cross-disciplinary “Pathways to Unknown Worlds: Sun Ra, El Saturn and Chicago’s Afro-Futurist Underground, 1954-68” [through Jan. 14], co-curated by John Corbett, Anthony Elms and Terri Kapsalis, documents the creative output of this well-known musician and mystic during his years in Chicago. “Interstellar Low Ways” [through Jan. 14], organized by Huey Copeland in conjunction with Elms, gathers artists influenced by Sun Ra, such as Pedro Bell, Destroy All Monsters, Karl Erickson, Matthew Hanner, Alex Hubbard, Derek Jackson, John Corbett, Anthony Elms and Terri Kapsalis, documents the creative output of this well-known musician and mystic during his years in Chicago. “Interstellar Low Ways” [through Jan. 14], organized by Huey Copeland in conjunction with Elms, gathers artists influenced by Sun Ra, such as Pedro Bell, Destroy All Monsters, Karl Erickson, Matthew Hanner, Alex Hubbard, Derek Jackson, John Corbett, Anthony Elms and Terri Kapsalis, documents the creative output of this well-known musician and mystic during his years in Chicago.

Elsewhere in Hyde Park

Although the University of Chicago plays a dominant role within Hyde Park, this South Side neighborhood is defined by its rich political history and by its multi-racial, multietnic communities. It is also home to some of the city’s more important art venues, among them the university’s Renaissance Society and its Smart Museum, as well as the more historically oriented South Shore Cultural Center and the DuSable Museum of African-American History.

The Renaissance Society, directed by Susanne Ghez, remains Chicago’s preeminent international forum for contemporary art. Its mission has always been to showcase important global figures and trends (offering many artists their U.S. premiere or first museum show), while providing key opportunities for locally based artists. This season’s schedule appears well aligned with the institution’s core strengths: a residency by Dutch artist Jeppe Hein, individual surveys of new works by the emerging Chicago artists
Ben Gest and Scott Short [Jan. 7-Feb. 18], a commissioned work by the collaborative Allora & Calzadilla [Mar. 4-Apr. 15] and an installation by German painter Katharina Grosse [Apr. 29-June 10].

Plans for the Smart Museum's expansion of its facilities (for which Garofalo Architects conducted the feasibility study) have been temporarily put on hold. The museum, since June 2005 under the directorship of Anthony Binscheil, is moving forward with a short-term solution to utilize space available from the university. Meanwhile, the Smart will develop the strengths of its research-oriented collection—works on paper, Asian art, and modern and contemporary art. Stephanie Smith, curator of contemporary art, continues to bring a spark to its contemporary program. Highlights of this fall's exhibition schedule include "Adrian Piper: The Mythic Being," "Drawing as Process in Contemporary Art," and "Mel Bochner: Language 1966-2006" [to Jan. 7] and, in particular, associate curator Dominic Molon, generated by less senior staff, such as assistant curator Kendell Geers: BE/LIE/VE [Mar. 4-Apr. 15].

In the interim, James Ronceau, curator of contemporary art and head of the department since 2004, continues to enliven the museum's contemporary program. According to Ronceau, the current focus is on updating the collection with new work by established masters and more acquisitions in film and video, and on restructuring the existing modern and contemporary galleries. The department is also crafting a more ambitious exhibition program. Lisa Dorn, recently appointed assistant curator of contemporary art, is taking over the Focus series, with forthcoming projects by Krygz artists Gulnara Kasmaleva and Muratbek Esmaleev [Feb. 1-May 6], and William Pope.L. [Oct. 1-December, closing date not yet fixed]. Noteworthy exhibitions include "Mel Bochner: Language 1966-2006" [to Jan. 7] and, in 2007, "Jeff Wall" (co-organized with MOMA, New York, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), on view June 30-Sept. 23, and "Jasper Johns: Gray" (in cooperation with the Metropolitan Museum of Art), running Nov. 3, 2007-Jan. 1, 2008.

With both the Cultural Center's and the Art Institute's identities firmly in place, and HPAC as the city's new laboratory for contemporary art, the role of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) is less well defined. Too large to be hospitable to art practices whose needs are at odds with the white cube, and too small to display its own collections permanently (a rationale for the new building), it is neither a kunsthal nor a destination museum known for the depth of its holdings in any particular area. The Art Institute's expanding involvement with modern and contemporary art will create more competition between the two institutions for private collections, perhaps prompting the MCA to rethink its current series of thematically based collection shows in favor of something more ambitious. Likewise, HPAC successfully establishes itself as an experimental forum for Chicago-based artists, the MCA may need to overhaul its 12 x 12: New Artists/New Work program, a series of small monthly shows devoted to emerging local artists. With its rotating roster of curators who take a one-month turn and then move on, the series lacks both the coherence and the kind of overall vision that only a single guiding intelligence can provide. As it is, the series seems more a token gesture than a real catalyst for change or launching careers.

Highlights of the MCA's exhibition program remain traveling shows organized elsewhere, such as this fall's "The Art of Richard Tuttle" [see A.i.A., Dec. '05] and "Massive Change: The Future of Global Design." A companion show to the latter, "Sustainable Architecture in Chicago, Works in Progress" [through Jan. 7], and Catherine Opie's recent photographic portraits of Chicago, both mounted by chief curator Elizabeth Smith, were strong but modest in scale. Although the upcoming Rudolf Stingel retrospective [Jan. 27-May 20] is organized by senior curator Francesco Bonami, this season's schedule reflects Bonami's increasingly detached role since he relocated to New York. The most successful efforts of the MCA's program seem to be generated by less senior staff, such as assistant curator Julie Rodrigues Witholm, organizer of an upcoming survey of new art from Mexico City [June 20-Sept. 2] and, in particular, associate curator Dominic Molon, who co-organized German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans's first U.S. retrospective, on view last summer.

Molon is also curating the forthcoming “Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll Since 1967” [Sept. 29, 2007-Jan. 27, 2008].

**New Initiatives**

A revamped HPAC dedicated to sustaining art produced in Chicago may prove to be a counterpart to the Chicago Art Project (CAP), a new initiative spearheaded by former art dealer Paul Klein. CAP’s mission is to create a museum that focuses on Chicago art, historical and contemporary; on education, mentoring and career-building; and on bolstering civic pride.

While some might argue that any new forum is welcome, to my mind there is an element of boosterism here that treats Chicago art only on its own terms rather than placing it within a broader, more international context. It also parallels efforts already in place at the Cultural Center, 2006, p. 59. Susan Snodgrass is a Chicago-based critic and a corresponding editor for Art in America.

Staci Boris, formerly of the MCA, was appointed senior curator of the Institute’s Jewish Museum, and Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek is the new curator of Judaica. Boris is developing a new contemporary art program that seeks to reframe Jewish identity by examining it in relation to a larger set of cultural issues. After closing the galleries in June, the museum commissioned contemporary artists to create site-specific works. “Language Barrier,” on view through December 2006, was a series of language-based projects conceived for the outside construction barrier: *Hello Again* by Kay Rosen, *BELIEVE* by Kendell Geers and *The Joys of Yiddish* by Mel Bochner, shown in conjunction with his exhibition at the Art Institute. *Across Time* by Lincoln Schatz documents the construction of the new facility, both in video and a sequence of still images. The work, activated by the viewer, is displayed on two adjoining video screens suspended from the ceiling in the lobby of the present museum, and will be moved to the new building when it opens in winter 2007.

Nearby and adding to several public works situated within Grant Park is *Agora* by Magdalena Abakano, which was inaugurated in late November. One hundred and six of the artist’s familiar figures, each 9 feet tall and cast in iron, were permanently installed in the park’s northeast corner and serve as a gateway to the South Loop.

Farther west, a new public work by James Turrell was unveiled in June. This outdoor observatory, measuring 26 feet high and 43 feet in diameter, is a domed structure supported by columns, with a central oculus that frames the sky. Like many of the artist’s works, Skyspace plays with perceptions of light and color, creating an intimate chamber in which viewers can encounter, as they rest upon curved benches, the effects of shifting light and atmospheric changes. Heightening the experience is an internal system of LED lights that casts a spectrum of color (best viewed at twilight), and soft veils of water that flow between alternating sets of the support pillars.

Turrell’s new Skyspace, commissioned by the University of Illinois at Chicago, is the centerpiece of a plaza (also designed by Turrell but less impressive) situated at the intersection of Halsted Street and Roosevelt Road, where the university, upscale gentrification and low-income populations meet. Turrell has created 12 permanent “Skyspaces” since 1975; this is one of four open to the public in the U.S. Unique is its street-level access, which provides respite from the activity of the surrounding environment while highlighting both the natural and urban landscapes. It is also open 24 hours a day, year-round.

The strength of the Chicago art world has always been its sense of invention and collaboration; HPAC, newly configured, potentially embodies both. My intent here is not to give preference to institutional activities above all others—a healthy art ecosystem also comprises alternative practices—but rather to suggest that HPAC offers an opportunity to examine critically the city’s institutions, perhaps providing a model for growth. Such projects are rare, but with luck this one will touch upon all aspects of the art community, grand and small, strengthening the existing infrastructure while creating synergistic possibilities as yet unknown.