

The SIMPS Pass Water

From the get-go, SIMPARCH has been captivated by the uneasy space between war and peace. SIMPS deliberately seek out places where a sole human-being and the institutional drift haplessly into each other's realm. It is not difficult to see why this art collaborative would pursue ventures along the border fence between Mexico and the USA, where the pathos of the individual and the principles of nations meet head-on.

Officially, SIMPARCH is classified as a group of sculptors, who create quirky scenarios and then build a response in the place of inquiry. One of the SIMPARCH boys was recently asked this question by a nonagenarian patroness who loves sculpture and believes in its ability to work the soul: "What kind of sculpture do you do?" Complete silence. "Well, umm, err ..." was about all she got. You would never know that being tongue-tied is part of the SIMPARCH act, but it fits with their aura of being Western-style working-class heroes, fighting inside the culture machine. It is their trademark process, the 'Simpy prerogative', and it requires of those with whom they work a complete faith that they are going to get it right, which they have done with uncanny accuracy in Hydromancy. So what did SIMPARCH do right?

At first glance, Hydromancy is quite simply an in-your-own-backyard solar-powered contraption to distill murky Rio Grande water into something drinkable. A trio of rectangular insulated plastic tanks sporting tempered glass tops is parked in the sunshine on a hillside outside of the Rubin Center. Clean globules of condensed water are leached out of the Rio Grande brew by these solar stills. The drips dribble into a tiny collector and join up with others to make a veritable stream of water. It's like looking at the beginning of the Nile, but homemade; in the magical process of making water appear from nowhere, viewers get to witness firsthand what it might have been like to be God when he said, "Let there be water!" It's hard to imagine that this stuff is actually drinkable, a sentiment probably also felt by Eve, which is precisely the point. SIMPARCH puts America's phobia with safety, purity and cleanliness into high relief, to a fever pitch where the only interlocutor could be comedy.

Then there's the question of the Rio Grande, a once vibrant water source reduced to a denatured trickle of chemical unhappiness. The poor, old river has been forced to take on the responsibilities of being a border-barrier, a hyper-enforced no-man's land of analog and digital surveillance, every bit as troubling as Jerusalem's West Bank wall. In this project, SIMPARCH straddles the border's ridge, and they start asking the difficult questions.

The trio of SIMPARCH's recent projects — Clean Livin', The Dirty Water Initiative [DWI], and now Hydromancy — takes on the question of water scarcity, and continues SIMPARCH's underlying theme of usefulness-in-art. This is eco-evangelism at its best, for once the gallery-goers are done and dusted with inspiration, SIMPARCH's water purifiers are popped into a van and driven over the border to the Mexican barrios and colonias and handed out to any willing souls who need fresh water, Mother Theresa style.

Of course, that's not quite true; a couple of water stills given to carefully vetted families is not exactly a viable solution for solving the water needs of a whole city, and I'll bet Mother Theresa would have agreed with that. But with Hydromancy, the American museum visitors swallow their own incredulity by drinking water from something other than trademarked plastic bottles, and the Mexican urban poor are graced with the contraptions after the show. It's a win-win situation, recycling's finest hour, for the recycling projects got recycled, double-dipped before their time.

But let's start with how the visitor gets to witness the program. A skimpy water pipe leads the way from a tank filled with river water, via the solar collectors, down to the museum with all the bravado of New York's Croton Aqueduct — but on a teensy-weensy scale. SIMPARCH lofts the pipe above the rocky hillside on spindly legs; an engineer would do a double take, because the support structure actually works. The pipe then mysteriously penetrates the Bhutanese-style building, and that's when things begin to get gnarly.

The visitor now enters the comfort zone of the museum. The pleasures of air conditioning are met by a simple stand of paper cups for a nice, cold drink. But where's the water? The first clue is a partial view of the same shiny pipe that began outdoors, as it juts out from the wall, 12 feet above the floor. We follow around the thick, felt curtain to the end of the pipe, in a room filled with a hodge-podge of round concrete stepping stones lying in a sea of puddles. Quick, where's the janitor? Someone clean this mess up; this is an art museum, not a leaky basement! But then we look again. The gravity within the metal conduit has lead the water onward and it is heard dribbling onto the floor below, with no bucket to catch the drips. The 5-foot fall makes an irritating spatter, reminding us of faulty spigots, but that is where the project's similarity to leaky hardware ends.

The sound of dripping water comes not only from the leaky pipe, but also is piped in over a deliciously layered looping soundtrack that leads us further into the enigma of Hydromancy. Artist Steve Rowell, also known as associate director at the Center for Land Use Interpretation, has orchestrated ambient sounds, gleaned by his microphones, which literally straddled the border fence, one pointing north and the other pointing south. In Hydromancy, the left channel of sound depicts Mexico and the right depicts the U.S. It's an ugly dichotomy, beautifully wrought. From one side of the gallery are calls from a lone protester on the riverbank below a bridge, pleading to his countrymen not to cross north. On the other is the smooth lament of swooshy rubber tires rolling beneath a fast ride. Never has vulcanized rubber sounded so good, a techno-gray noise that has put countless children asleep in the back of the family minivan. The ante is upped when the soundtrack pumps out the snicker-snacker of helicopter blades filling the air with expectant menace, prompting a tiny imaginary voice that calls out, "What did I do wrong?"

Steve Rowell crafts a set of tracks for Hydromancy, each prompting another field of dread at the wonders that litter the border wall. The hum of wires, or transformers, or gears, or reversing trucks, or big-factory-noise, is full of squeak and widget. The dark

poetry of the fence has been captured perfectly. So few voices and so much mechanical monotone, whose inflection adjusts every now and then, as if coming from a huge slumbering robotic giant on whose bad side one would never wish to be. This is the soundtrack to the New Nature, which is kept alive on a gas-powered ventilating machine, full of hubris, complete and unyielding. What have we done to ourselves, we ask?

The discourse is further accelerated by SIMPARCH's floodlighting the puddles on the floor with high beams, creating a mercury-like reflection of the dripping water onto the wall. So what does it all mean? The tiny cascade of water is emblematic of the wastage of the fresh, clean water that 99.99 percent of North Americans mindlessly flush down the sink every day. We are close to opera here — the accompanying text is on the wall, but we are the ones onstage.

Despite Hydromancy's disarming simplicity, it takes an outpouring of energy to make projects like this, if make is the right word, since water just is; the processes of cleaning water and listening to its music are what matter here. For many, it will be the first time witnessing the cause and effect of what it takes to bring a glass of crystal-clear water into the world. The six bucks that Omni Hotels now charges for a liter of Evian water at the bedside mini-bar is beginning to seem like a bargain.

Hydromancy is part of a series of projects by SIMPARCH that forces us to consider our ecological footprint. For anyone who wonders what it would be like to live life in acute domesticity whilst maintaining good ecological manners, such as those advocated in Hydromancy, the project Clean Livin' is the place to be. Located in Wendover, Utah, Clean Livin' is a zero-carbon-footprint homestead set in the most abrasive conjunction of what Mother Nature and the U.S. military machine has to offer. SIMPARCH has taken over a vintage Quonset hut located on the B-29 training base adjacent to the salt flats at Wendover, part of the Center for Land Use Interpretation's mission in Utah. It has frequent stinging winds laden with salt crystals and hard pan dirt held together by 50 years of crud leaching out from Pratt and Whitney propeller engines. It is also the occasional home to the new toxicity of microwave-radar, supplied by the U.S. Air Force. A handsome array of mobile towers combs the air with vicious waves that make dentist-chair radiation look like Mickey Mouse. When in residence at Clean Livin', the military is kind enough to suggest that visitors bend their heads a little, to sidestep the evil rays. Politesse still has its place in the world.

It is against this unholy backdrop that the full orchestration of SIMPARCH's power comes into being. Upon waking up in the morning, a pedal-powered vehicle provided by municipalWORKSHOP, sporting a 120-gallon barrel mounted on the rear, is wheeled out of a shed with all the care of the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk. Substituting for a morning workout at the gym, the day's water is cycled the six miles and then pumped up into a tower to get a good head of pressure. An electric pump is fired up by 700-watt

solar panels that provide the juice for the entire complex; soon a nice shower/sunbath is to be had in the morning sunshine.

So, what do we do in the ecotopia of Clean Livin', where the grid is gone and the only groups we stand beholden to are the IRS and our collective conscience? It depends who you are. SIMPARCH describes Clean Livin' as a cultural product where the cause and effect of resource and waste are brought so close to one another that the act of living itself becomes more spirited and more fun, for it is witnessed vividly. For the hyper-educated, living within limits like this could be considered an exotic internment camp, where you elect to "go native" and indulge yourself in a cornucopia of green principles, an überspa to clean out the toxic grime of consumerism. Would you want to live there? Hell no, not me! But a visit might be OK.

SIMPARCH is not here to make North American life an unmitigated misery populated by eco-Nazis. Instead, they take on the difficult task of proposing a change in behavior toward our environment, rather than engaging the same consumptive lifestyle at half-price. Instead of increasing fuel efficiency of vehicles (which has been found to bump up the number of vehicles on the road, leading to worsening traffic congestion), they advocate behavior change through bicycles and public transportation — to meet the problem half way.

From all accounts, urban behavior change in the barrios and colonias south of the border has already taken place, irrespective of urban planning. Projects like Hydromancy demonstrate the preciousness of resources, the insanity of consumptive ways north of the Rio Grande, and their practical, if untidy, resolution to the south. Art has an uncanny way of getting to our soul when the voice of reason turns to a whimper; furthermore, it can be prophetic. With Hydromancy, SIMPARCH and Steve Rowell show that the north may well take a page out of the lessons of the south, and its time may come sooner than we think. Whether Mother Nature is listening, arbitrating, or even cares to hear is quite another matter, but at least we have had a chance to confront our own infallibilities.

© Ben Nicholson

4/4/07