

SIMPARCH BY SUE SPAID

Weston Art Gallery, Cincinnati OH May 5 · July 25, 2006 / Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati OH May 6 · October 1, 2006



Coinciding with the 2006 Cincinnati Crossroads Sculpture Conference (June 21 – 24), SIMPARCH's dual installations at neighboring institutions affirmed that the sculptural field is indeed expanding. A few years back, SIMPARCH collaborators Steve Badgett and Matt Lynch gained fame for *Free Basin* (2002), their traveling swimming-pool-inspired wooden skateboarding bowl, whose mesmerizing sounds lured passersby to climb up into the bowl to discover what was happening above.

Characteristic of what Rosalind Krauss termed "axiomatic structures," SIMPARCH structures fall somewhere between "architecture" and "not architecture." Unlike the built environments she categorized, SIMPARCH typically confound existing architecture, yet they ambitiously yearn to influence architectural practice. The two projects presented here are no exception. When Krauss conceived of axiomatic structures, sculptors rarely employed sound as a feature of their work, the way sculptors do today. Today's noisy axiomatic structures recall public spaces like lobbies, elevators, stores, and restaurants, classic arenas for background Muzak. Sited in lobby galleries, both "Gloom & Doom" projects engaged unwitting publics, while disrupting each building's prescribed circulation. You may recall the 2004 Whitney Biennial where SIMPARCH placed as large a Quonset hut as possible in the below-grade courtyard adjacent the restaurant. For some, this work overwhelmed the Breuer building's remarkable facade, yet it invited viewers to visit this vastly under-used outdoor space.

For the Weston Art Gallery exhibition, SIMPARCH installed a two-story hothouse, a model home where law enforcement officers stage surprise-attack arrests, within a highly visible street-level gallery, thus engendering alternative activities for curious passersby. The surfaces of its gorgeous plywood furniture (designs based on mid-century *Plywood Working for Everybody* patterns) were strewn with compelling posters of innocent people, sold as shooting targets (www.letarget.com). So many people requested posters as takeaway art during the opening that I worried whether any would be left for the exhibition. As the show wore on, the souvenirs disappeared, only to be replaced by a growing accumulation of children's drawings, giving one the sense that children had unwittingly transformed this otherwise "heinous" hothouse into their "populist" playhouse. Two weeks into the exhibition, SIMPARCH evidently hosted a feng shui family workshop, leaving course detritus (plants and all) as souvenirs of the structure's newest status.

Sound is such an integral part of these two works that SIMPARCH invited Steve Rowell, Center for Land Use Interpretation co-director who leads the Sonic Boom Archive project, to compose *Tactile Air I* and *II*, the title of each site's soundscape. To replicate life beneath a military flyway, SIMPARCH built a sonic boom simulator on the hothouse's second floor. Upon entering this room with gabled roof horns, one encounters a high-decibel playback of sonic booms (audible effects of shock waves caused by objects moving faster than sound) reverberating throughout this custom-built anechoic chamber, interspersed with the sound of birds and rain. Click on www.cincinnati.org/weston/ex5-06.html to access the Weston Art Gallery project's 8-minute track of sound (and infra-sound) in perpetuity. The hothouse thus recalls Martin Kersels's *Loud House* (1994), a wooden house lined with beer bottles, which reverberated exponentially in response to the sound of a videotaped recording of Martin jumping wildly in the very same house. Both experiential houses actually magnify an underlying "actual" experience.

Zaha Hadid must have been taken aback by the sight of a drop ceiling, black-and-white acoustic tiles depicting a B-2 Spirit Stealth Bomber, hovering at a precarious angle in the lobby of her award-winning building. Playing only once an hour, every so often one heard the soundtrack of a man's voice, apparently giving instructions while planes fly overhead. No matter how you slice it, SIMPARCH are incredibly thoughtful artists. Loads of artists make experiential works, yet hardly anyone has figured out how to embed them with challenging content, material so subtle as to fail to influence the experience at hand. A contraction of "simple" and "architecture," SIMPARCH is rather the leader in the field of "simulated" "park" design. Thus this welcoming acceptance of the plants contributed to their hothouse facilitated its transformation into a greenhouse for grassroots activities.

SIMPARCH, INSTALLATION VIEWS, "GLOOM & DOOM," (LEFT TO RIGHT) WESTON ART GALLERY & CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, CINCINNATI. PHOTO TONY WALSH