



From top: Anja Kirschner, *Polly II: Plan for a Revolution in Docklands*, 2006, still from a color video, 30 minutes. K2 Aufbau Organisation, *Bohemian Lobotomy*, 2006. Performance view, Frieze Art Fair, London, 2006. Photo: Polly Braden. Antony Gormley's site-specific sculpture, *Waste Man*, 2006, created for *The Margate Exodus* and installed at the former Dreamland funfair, Margate, England, September 30, 2006.



and social cohesion, and even to deal with the decreasing governmental provision of social services. The novel hyperpresence of art in everyday life here is, of course, immediately discernable in the gargantuan, interactive, art-as-entertainment ethos of Tate Modern—the most popular contemporary museum in the world, with four million visitors each year—as well as in events such as the Beck's Futures prize at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, which recently incorporated public voting terminals. (The ICA's Jens Hoffmann called the latter an invitation for people "to contemplate the visual arts in general and to give them a voice in the discussion surrounding contemporary art.") But as important as it is for these institutions to expand the consumer base, art has a new, more significant status as a fix-all tool for society at large and a proxy for now-vanished public forums. For instance, a reality TV program soon to be on Channel 4 allows participants to nominate artists to build a public art piece. A Soviet-scale, state-funded performance such as this year's *Margate Exodus* provides a caricatured example of the prevalent "socially engaged" community projects springing up with the decline of the welfare state: Appealing for the better treatment of people seeking asylum in the UK, the work involved a community pageant—cum—film shoot with local

volunteers constructing an eighty-two-foot-tall Antony Gormley sculpture from the "detritus of consumer society."

It's a perfect example of how the state uses art as an exercise in community cohesion and a benign form of autocritique, giving cosmetic aid to the underprivileged. In such cases artists often unwittingly prep these places for the oncoming waves of gentrification; elsewhere the effort is more overt, taking the form of "creative hubs" (modeled after the former East London artist colony Shoreditch) that are financially supported by the government. It is, however, also worth noting that certain artists are addressing these developments in their own work. At the risk of doing what most year-end surveys do—identify the young up-and-comers—I would like to point to London-based German artist Anja Kirschner's *Polly II: Plan for a Revolution in Docklands*, 2006, which resists the assumption that aesthetic or political benefit necessarily arises simply from educating viewers about gentrification or from working with communities. Screened in April at the Whitechapel Project Space, this video continues a saga begun in John Gay's 1728 play *The Beggar's Opera*: Part sci-fi, part *Lehrstück*, the film depicts a futuristic East London submerged by floodwaters that leave scant land and resources for the surviving working-class residents, many of whom turn to piracy to fight the private interests expropriating the remaining lands. (For many, this deluge will call to mind Hurricane Katrina, although the work was conceived prior to that cataclysm.) *Polly II* is shot in a style at times reminiscent of popular British soaps, yet this genre is made strange by the use of Brechtian tropes of narrator and chorus, as well as by visibly artificial video effects that create a striking patchwork verisimilitude of the sunken city.

But here again, the radical change in art's relationship to the public leads us back to commerce. While this year *The Guardian* proclaimed that knowledge of art has become de rigeur for "anyone who wants to think of themselves as remotely on the cultural radar," such statements are part of a more general trend, identified by writer Anthony Davies, toward the cultivation of a "New Art Consumer" in the UK.* After years of lessons in art collecting and connoisseurship provided by numerous public art institutions, for example, a major push to encourage art buying has been initiated by the government's Arts Council, which is now offering an interest-free lending program for art buyers, called "Own Art." The scheme helps those who normally would not have the cash to buy art, but it must also be seen in the context of major governmental restructuring in arts funding, since, like other current arts policy changes, it shifts the state's responsibility for supporting individual art projects onto private sources—in this case, the commercial art market.

The enormous presence of the Frieze Art Fair is undoubtedly part of this shift. It was, after all, on the occasion of the fair last October

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