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Outside Flux Factory in Long Island City



Installation shot of "Everything Must Go" at Flux Factory



Map of works in "Everything Must Go"



Nick Normal's sculpture in "Everything Must Go"

ART IN FLUX

by Ben Davis

"Everything Must Go," Apr. 4-26, 2008, at Flux Factory, 38-38 43rd Street, Long Island City, NY 11101

When people ask me what my favorite gallery is, I always answer Flux Factory. This has been the case at least since I first reviewed a show at the energetic Long Island City nonprofit-cum-artist collective, a solo exhibition by the very-cool sculptor Paul Burn, back when I wrote the culture page for the *Queens Courier*.

Sadly, I might have to make a new choice. Flux Factory has just opened what looks to be its final show in its current space, aptly titled "Everything Must Go." The MTA has announced the eminent domain takeover of the block to make way for a rail link to Grand Central Terminal.

"Shitty," is the answer Flux Factory's Stefany Anne Golberg gives when asked how the group feels about this state of affairs. "The MTA has made this about as difficult as they could." Information has been impossible to get, she says. "We've known about the possibility for two years, and then it's just like, you've got 90 days to clear out."

Golberg, one of the Flux Factory's core members along with Jean Barbaris, Morgan Meis and Chen Tamir, says the organization is looking for a new building. It is likely, however, that after "Everything Must Go" closes, the 18-odd artists who currently live and collaborate in the space will disperse. In the future, Golberg says, Flux Factory will probably separate living and exhibition spaces, marking an end to an adventurous experiment that began with a bunch of New School philosophy undergrads living together in 1994.

The project was launched in Williamsburg, migrating to LIC in 2002 to escape rising rents. Flux Factory signed a 15-year lease on a large space, located behind a Midtown Express building (and, as their website puts it, "often hidden by Midtown Express trucks"), with a vista of a giant, spaceship-like Chinese Presbyterian Church. The venue has a large front gallery, and dorm-style living space in the back where the various members of the collective make their home.

Of course, the artists associated with Flux Factory don't all live there. Nevertheless, the loss of the living space is huge. The veiled or not-so-veiled motif of most of their ambitious projects, whether inside and outside their base, has been the joys of living and working together. Their 2002 intervention at the Queens Museum, "When Everyone Agrees It Means Nobody Understood," had members of the collective tunneling into the walls and dwelling there. At the LIC space, their most famous project, 2005's "Novel" had three novelists live and complete works in the gallery as an art performance; in 2006, "Flux Box" had artists collaborate to transform the gallery into a giant music box; 2007 brought "NYNYNY," for which artists created a "cohesive yet chaotic installation, a multimedia, scale-model of the city." (As it turns out, the Burn show I covered was a rare piece that was not a team effort.)



Adrian Owen and Mitchell D. Sickon working on their project, *Precious*



Sarah Glidden's drawing in "Everything Must Go"



Installation view of Marie Losier's *Flying Saucy!* in "Everything Must Go"



David Felix Sutcliffe's mysterious tube

I haven't always loved everything they've done; sometimes it has seemed too precious, or only partially thought through. But then again, the group is more creative lab than gallery, so a bit of unevenness is par for the course. And in general, the madcap, intimate vibe of what they do feels unforced and on target.

"Everything Must Go" is a fine coda to their years in the LIC gallery. For the project, they invited all artists who had passed through to contribute pieces about Flux Factory itself. The result is some 60 sprawling projects that sum up, comment on or reference the group's traditions, current situation and unstable future, courtesy past and current residents and collaborators.

In the front gallery space, Flux sculptor Nick Normal has moved all his possessions into the middle of the room, wrapped them in plastic and arranged them into a kind of fort, a work about displacement spiked with the group's usual sense of child-like play. At the bustling opening, Golberg and Meis were performing a "garage sale" of Flux ephemera, offering random bits of detritus tagged with humorous post-its that explained the lore attached to them (on a jar of herbs labeled "Boldo": "*What in heaven's name is Boldo?*"). Elsewhere, Adrian Owen and Mitchell D. Sickon, dressed in matching lumberjack shirts, recreated a game of *Lord of the Rings* Risk from afternoons past in the space, retracing their moves on maps of Middle Earth with red pins, a bit of nostalgia that also echoes the grinding war for territory faced by the Factory's creative forces.

For the final month of the collective's life, Flux Factory has also broken down whatever tension there was between exhibition and living space to fill the back rooms with projects by various members, and this is where the action is really at. In the dense, warren-like back rooms, it is hard to tell the various pieces of social-experiment art from the background of random contraptions and props (in fact, I talked to one recently moved-in resident who didn't consider herself an artist at all, but had simply decided to turn her space into a jungle). The experience hits home the basis of their house style in the mix of collective accountability and improvisation required by this kind of living situation.

Located in what appears to be a workshop, a large drawing by Sarah Glidden depicts chaotic storage racks, and is suspended by string in front of an actual chaotic storage rack, beneath a wire-and-pulley mechanism for storing bikes in the air. Nearby, in a corner, Marie Losier's 16mm film *Flying Saucy!* flickers on an improvised screen, offering the seemingly free-associative narrative of women exploding out of a giant, extraterrestrial pot of spaghetti.

Another resident, David Felix Sutcliffe, has built a slide that runs into the group's library from his loft, as well as a long, orange fabric tube that thrusts into the kitchen, looking like something out of Dr. Seuss. Sutcliffe deliberately makes a project of blurring the line between the interior of his room and common space.

Opening night, every cubby seemed to be occupied with a different loopy something. Drummers were stuffed into one red-curtained room, thumping away. Next door, men dressed in doctor scrubs were hustling people in and out for some mysterious ritual. The sign outside another room advertised "Free Milkshakes" and asked visitors to "Come into My Bed and Eat Pie." In the bathroom, there was video art, techno music, fresh-squeezed orange juice.

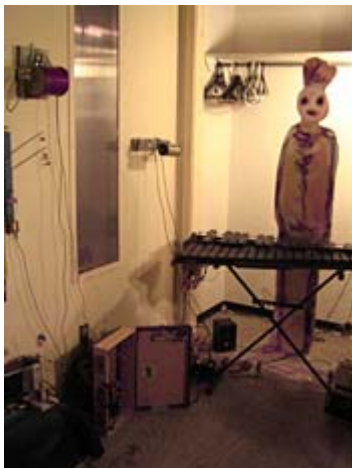
My favorite was the room where Nick Yulman's homemade musical contraptions -- mechanized xylophones, rattles made from match boxes, suitcases full of noisemakers -- were programmed to execute a spooky-gorgeous symphonic ode to the Factory's final days, something between a Danny Elfman score and *Ballet mécanique*. The



Mikey Barringer performance at the opening of "Everything Must Go"



Performing François Leloup-Collet's *Body Double*



Nick Yulman's music machines

room had been decorated with groovy painted cut-outs of ghosts by Debra Marie Drexler, specters manning the instruments as they whirled away.

In a back corner of the Factory, a room was devoted to a "Museum of Found Objects" put together by Shalin Scupham, the walls studded with curios "lent" to the "museum," accompanied by forms detailing why the erstwhile owners thought their item worthy of attention. These ranged in value from Cassandra Ferland's donation of a small pearl shaped like a penis (the so-called "Penis Pearl") to Chen Tamir's gift of a "Disgusting Object," a white circular rind of caked latex, apparently found at the installation of the Brooklyn Museum's Murakami show ("Known previous owners: Takashi Murakami, Brooklyn Museum, Louis Vuitton, Kanye West.")

In some way, the tossed-off creativity of all this seems emblematic of Flux Factory's procedure, plowing through the soil of life and seeing what bits that are interesting, fun or worth preserving pop up.

Afterwards, I went back and read through an unpublished review of mine of Flux Factory's 2006 "Almost Something" show, curated by Emilie Po and Francis Gonzales, for which artists filled the gallery with various works on the precarious edge of being unidentifiable as art -- yet another variation on the theme of the minimal difference between art and the everyday. Like the current show, it was densely packed, full of witty variations on a shared idea. It came complete with three different audio tours offering contradictory interpretations of what was art in the show.

My review went unpublished, delayed beyond the point of usefulness as I tried to squeeze the art in "Almost Something" into some kind of argument about the paradoxes of communalism in a corporate world. On the whole, I was enthusiastic, though I did write of the group, "Because of their aversion to any kind of seriousness, their strategies have in the past risked injokey-ness. . . and, even worse, replicating what they are resisting: the art world's easy self-congratulation. This is the problem of most art that makes a fetish out of community."

These days, that comment seems to me to miss the mark. It is true that social experiments are in vogue, but it's also clear that actual investment in a space, in a style of thinking and being, changes things decisively. The classic dilemma of communes, artistic and political alike, is not first of all "replicating what they resist." It is encirclement -- given how difficult society makes things, actual alternatives exist on fragile, unstable and temporary basis in the absence of larger movements challenging the powers-that-be. This exactly describes the present state of affairs for Flux Factory.

The group, of course, will persevere. Barbaris, Golberg, Meis and Tamir have focused their next year's programming on mobile projects, curated in public transportation and in other people's living rooms. And finally, as to their "aversion to any kind of seriousness," whatever the group's specific destiny, I do think that if ever there is a rebirth of a really defiantly alternative counterculture, it will probably grow out of places like this, where creative people's innocent desire to carve out a space for themselves runs up against frustration with the Man's stupid, stupid bureaucracy.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at bdavis@artnet.com



Nick Yulman contemplating his work



Debra Marie Drexler with her painted cut-outs



Exhibit in Shalin Scupham's "Museum of Found Objects"



Slide from a Powerpoint presentation on view in the "Museum of Found Objects"



Slide from a Powerpoint presentation on view in the "Museum of Found Objects"



Johannes DeYoung's *Forget It*, installed on the deck at Flux Factory