What to Make of MAD’s Maker Biennial?

Ben Davis, Wednesday, July 30, 2014

My first reaction to the debut incarnation of the Museum of Arts and Design’s new biennial, “NYC Makers,” was: What’s with this “maker” business?

I mean, the term “artist” is confusing enough these days. “Designer” contains multitudes. “Maker,” abstracted from its origins in the “maker culture” of DIY tech hobbyists, becomes almost meaningless (Time just did a report on the “Maker Movement” which reported that 135 million Americans count as “makers,” i.e. more than half of the US adult population.) It also conjures for me the vacant corporate patter of calling people “creatives,” only for the self-employed. What do you do?“Oh, I’m working on an app/make jewelry out of computer parts/am getting my home-brewed root beer start-up off the ground... I am a maker.”
Still, maybe the category confusion is worth it if it lets some good, weird stuff in the door, and “NYC Makers” is weird in ways both good and bad. For the freshly minted event, new MAD director Glenn Adamson has proposed a curatorial procedure—either a radical gesture of democratic inclusion or, alternatively, a time-saving measure for an ambitious event that came together fairly fast—that involves delegating curatorial selection of the 100 participants in the exhibition to a diverse team of 300 NYC tastemakers, tasked with nominating their favorite people who, you know, make things.

The result is confusing. It contains well-known art figures like Laurie Anderson and then difficult-to-classify ones like John Hatleberg, who makes replicas of famous gems. Figuring out what you’re looking at in the average art biennial is hard enough, but here you have the added burden of figuring out whether what you are looking at is art at all, or fashion, or liquor-making, or something less classifiable, like a guy who builds clever displays for dinosaur museums. It’s a show so woolly that the security guards are literally forced to wear yarn vests in addition to their conventional outfits (by the fashion design team Eckhaus Latta).
But if you give it a chance, you will discover something for all tastes, even if those tastes are sometimes like chocolate and cheese. In the fourth floor section of the show dedicated to “Stage and Street,” there’s a display of flamboyant hats from Harriet Rosebud, a Harlem-based milliner who keeps the traditional trade of the African-American “church hat” alive. Just one step away from this, we leave the church for the theater: there’s a butane-fueled, 3D-printed candelabra used in a recent production of The Glass Menagerie, by J&M Special Effects. Its tiny rosebud lights come on if you hit a button. And then we leave our present space-time altogether, via a pleasantly odd black monolith-like display by the art group Yemenwed, which presents spacey fake commercials for a dystopian women’s lifestyle brand.

Paola Antonelli’s blockbuster design-stravaganzas at MoMA have shown off a variety of futuristic gizmos, patenting a kind of high-brow trade show vibe. There’s a little bit of that here, as with The DepthKit from the group Specular (pictured below), a “depth-sensing” camera that theoretically allows filmed footage to be transformed into interactive 3D. There’s a projection here of the camera’s view of the gallery, and a joystick allows you to swivel the image around, viewing a wireframe version of your own head from several different angles (this is really just like looking at your head from different angles, but I can see how the idea might have interesting applications).
By far the most radical item in the show almost gets lost: It appears to be a simple, somewhat chunky plastic turntable/synthesizer. Actually, however, this object is a mere demonstration of the powers of littleBits, a Lego-like kit of magnetic electronic parts that can be snapped together in limitless ways to prototype devices or teach aspiring basement hobbyists the joys of tinkering. Essentially, it’s a training kit to make “makers” of us all. Given the nature of this proposition, it does feel weird to just look at it.

The dominant tone in “NYC Makers” is actually not techie, though, but scrappy, funky, artsy. The show’s main use is not as a showcase of realistic proposals, but as an outlet for things that mine the odd neither/nor space between art and design, an increasingly rich seam: Miriam Simun’s jewelry intended to function like an antenna that lets you smell what you eat better (another item that is, sadly, not available for demonstration here); Lika Volkova’s line of unique canvas vests made from scraps of disused paintings; Natalie Jeremijenko’s CHILDxLABORxCOLAwkshop with school kids, teaching them how to make their own sugary soda as a lesson in
political economy, presented via a science fair-like display in the lobby that’s easy to miss.

The emblematic item in the MAD biennial, though, is *Bad Dancer*, a music video by Yoko Ono and the Plastic Ono Band, made to celebrate the famed artist’s 80th birthday, which plays in the fourth floor galleries just as you enter from the elevator. It features an extremely random group of Ono’s celebrity friends including Ad Rock and Mike D from the Beastie Boys, nonsense comedian Reggie Watts, and *This American Life* voice Ira Glass, among others, bopping together and bobbing around and, well, dancing badly. It’s a little embarrassing to watch, but hard really to dislike, because it manages to look so good-natured. MAD’s Maker Biennial has a similar vibe, which means that the new event may not have it made, but it makes out just fine.