frieze

Form Follows Function

Melding utopianism with utilitarianism, Marjetica Potrc's projects and exhibitions prompt questions about the responsibilities of artists to the greater social realm

'By most estimates, 2007 will see the world's urban population outnumber the rural population for the first time, while those living in slums will exceed a billion. The UN predicts numbers of slum-dwellers will probably double in the next 30 years, meaning the developing world slum will become the primary habitat of mankind.'
The Guardian Weekend, 1 April 2006

The best way to see a star in the night sky is not to look at it; you will see it more clearly out of the corner of your eye. Effecting social change can also demand a similar side-stepping of what might initially appear logical. Without funding or government involvement, social, economic or ecological crises are unsolvable unless imaginative leaps are taken, fuelled by what could best be described as a wild-eyed pragmatism; a desire for what is seemingly impossible and then the achieving of it. (I am reminded of the recent extraordinary photograph of a Greenpeace activist somehow clinging to the back of a thrashing, harpooned whale in the middle of a boiling sea, while being battered by water jets from Japanese sailors – a form of direct action Herman Melville might have approved of but which I doubt was ever suggested in a boardroom.)

Thinking up solutions to tricky problems – how, say, to flush a toilet without water or build a home without official permission or create sustainable architecture from locally sourced or recycled materials, or grow a hydroponic vegetable garden on a roof – is what interests Marjetica Potrc. A Slovenian artist who originally trained as an architect, she now considers herself a storyteller who builds stories with architectural materials. When asked why she shifted her career from architecture to art, she said, 'I don't like the idea of sitting in an architect's office and drawing plans, poring over the papers and thinking about a city as a body that you can control, save and operate like surgeons do'.1

An inveterate optimist, Potrc produces work that is fierce in its emphasis on the workable, home-grown solutions – not failings – that characterize individuals and communities faced with seemingly insurmountable economic and social

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problems, most of which have been caused by the worst manifestations of capitalism, post-colonialism and globalism. Uninterested in simply pointing out the inequities she witnesses in order to generate compassion, she prefers to live with, talk to, learn from and create projects with local people directly affected by their environments. One example of this approach is Caracas: Dry Toilet (2003–4), the result of a six-month stay in a barrio (shanty-town) in Caracas in Venezuela during which Potrc, in collaboration with Israeli architect Liyat Esakov and the La Vega neighbourhood association, designed a dry, ecologically safe toilet that collects waste and turns it into fertilizer for an area with no running water.

Potrc describes the invention as an 'attempt to rethink the relationship between infrastructure and architecture in real-life urban practice in a city where about half the population receives water from municipal authorities no more than two days a week.'2 In 2004, on the other side of the world, Potrc was commissioned by the Liverpool Biennial to respond to the city as she saw fit. After discussions with the residents of the 14th floor of Bispham House, a run-down tower block, she designed Balcony with Wind Turbine (2004): a bay window with a wind-turbine attached to it was added to a flat to supply it with free energy and better views across the city. The artist writes 'One of the most important points I wanted to make was that tenants do not have to be resettled in order to improve their living conditions.'3 More recently, Potrc's ongoing project Europe Lost and Found is an international, interdisciplinary research project that the artist devised in collaboration with curator and artist Kyong Park after they had journeyed together for some months to various cities in the Balkans. Over the next three years they hope to explore, through discussion, exhibitions, events and collaboration with a large group of architects, artists and cultural workers, the present workings and future imaginings of Europe's shifting borders and territories. At the time of writing, however, Potrc has just arrived in Acre, a remote Amazon region of Brazil, close to the Bolivian border, to study the relationship between the stilt houses known as palafitas, the regeneration of the local economy and how traditional life in Acre has adapted to 21st-century society. She will be there for two months, and in September the results of her research will be displayed, in a way that has yet to be decided, in the appropriately titled São Paulo Biennial 'How to Live Together'.

Despite the educational aspects of her practice, Potrc's research resists neat conclusions about the relationship between architecture and art; she conflates contrasting architectural motifs in her gallery-based sculptural installations not as answers to or illustrations of a problem but as points of discussion. This can confound the viewer, who might approach her work expecting a purely

anthropological take on cause and effect. Using the gallery to explore displacement of pre-existent forms as a direct form of critical engagement with the world outside its white walls, Potrc treats buildings and objects alike as rough templates of ready-mades: she does not make exact replicas of the original dwellings for her shows but builds hybrid structures in the manner of the barrio, using materials that are cheap, available and sourced in the vicinity of the gallery, juxtaposing unrelated elements from various locations. In this sense her work literally evolves: the same installation will differ from show to show. With its bright colours and unexpected leaps from country to architecture and then back to the gallery, the playfulness of Potrc's work is as much about her own inventiveness as an artist as it is about the creativity of the people she is drawing our attention to. (As Max Protetch put it, she makes 'structures that are sculptures based on architecture based on human inventiveness'.4) Some examples of this approach include Caracas: House with Extended Territory (2003), that she built in Berlin's Galerie Nordenhake, and Summer House (2004), shown at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, which comprised a rebuilding of a house designed by the early Modernist architect Paul Rudolph Walker, that Potrc installed inside a water tower. Next Stop, Kiosk Building (2003), exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, Slovenia, was a reconstruction of a Brazilian stilt house balanced on top of a group of city kiosks designed in the late 1960s as mobile dwelling units by the Ljubljana-based architect Sasa Maechtig. Similarly, Potrc's monumental sculpture Hybrid House: Caracas, West Bank, West Palm Beach, which she made for her exhibition 'Urgent Architecture' at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art (PBICA) in 2003, juxtaposes reconstructions from the temporary architecture of Caracas, the West Bank and West Palm Beach, Florida – three areas that, although culturally disparate, share concerns about public and private space, personal safety and community interaction. This enormous work was built from materials including turned wooden dowels, black plastic milk crates, corrugated red metal, grids, a water tank, concrete blocks, a satellite dish, a mobile home, a 'dry' toilet and a quantity of bright pink paint. Scrawled across the gallery wall was the slogan 'All that is temporary desires permanence'. Reflecting on this piece, Potrc wrote 'the most important thing about this exhibition was the attempt to construct an understandable language out of the apparent madness of cities in crisis.'5

Potrc is not only interested in architectural solutions to urban problems. For her ongoing project Power Tools, Experimental Prototypes and Utilitarian Objects (2001–ongoing) she makes colourful, simply rendered drawings and texts inspired by various ingenious commercially produced objects she admires. These include inventions such as the

Hippo Water Roller (a device created by Imvubu Projects to facilitate the individual transport of water from a well to a home in townships in South Africa), solar-powered flashlights, a clockwork mobile phone charger and a survival kit used by the Mexican government and the US Border Patrol for would-be immigrants that contains anti-diarrhoeal medicine, adhesive bandages, birth control pills and condoms. She has also done a series of photographs of wild animals living in the city ('Animal Sightings', 2001); 'like immigrants,' she said, 'they just keep coming.'6

Potrc's explorations of how communities solve the tribulations any group of people living together inevitably face often take the shape of 'Case Studies', multilayered works that are manifested as texts that Potrc posts up on her website (http://www.potrc.org). For her online project Urban Independent Potrc asks 'What does India's Barefoot College have in common with the annual Burning Man gathering in the United States, the Dutch urban development project Leidsche Rijn, Jordan's East Wahdat Upgrading Program, and the Rural Studio in Alabama? While each of these settlements represents a distinct local story, none of them have accepted established ways of envisioning community or the regulations imposed by society. Their success is founded upon the active participation of individuals in designing, building, and implementing their architecture and infrastructure systems.' For the project Potrc asked a representative from each group – either the founder or a participant – to respond to a set of questions that explore the motivations and implications of what they have achieved: 'What was the catalyst for your endeavour? Whose community is it? What models did you look at while developing this project? What problem-solving practices have been instrumental in creating locally responsive solutions? Can these be applied to other communities? And what does the future bring?'

Potrc's work is complicated and, at times, superficially contradictory. Although the focus of her attention is seemingly a long way, in every sense, from the cool environment of the conventional gallery space, she obviously regularly exhibits in major commercial galleries, museum shows and biennials. Her practice inevitably raises questions about the aptness of an art gallery as a site for the discussion of social deprivation. As Jan Verwoert has asked: 'Is it a politically legitimate gesture to appropriate architectural forms born from need and necessity and restage them in the context of an art discourse?'7 To Potrc the answer to such a question could only be 'no' if you believe that art galleries are the decadent ruins of a once potent site of discussion – something that Potrc, who talks passionately about the still untapped potential of art's educational and communicative role, doesn't believe for a second. For her, art at its best is a form of consciousness-raising and possibility, and the gallery

a site for reflection and discussion.

Melding Utopianism with utilitarianism, Potrc is simultaneously a documentarian, archivist, educator, inventor and sculptor. Her approach is firmly in the tradition of socially engaged artists from around the world including Bonnie Sherk, Andrea Zittel, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Yona Friedman, Michael Rakowitz, Dan Graham and Aleksandra Mir, to name but a few, whose work springs from real-life situations that prompt discussion about the relationship and responsibility of the artist to a greater social realm – be it a children's farm, a shelter, clothing, an improvised dwelling for a homeless person or abortion rights. In many ways, though, her artistic lineage can also be traced directly back to the fascination Dada and Situationist artists and writers had with the aesthetics of everyday life, with the idea of the city as an organic moral entity, and to their shared belief in social change being integral to creativity – and vice versa. Potrc, however, never loses sight of the individual struggling to make a living at the heart of these debates. As she put it: 'One could say that the empowerment of individuals through architecture is political, and this is true – design and aesthetics, after all, have never been neutral. But this misses the main point. For it is simply a question of human dignity to be able to build your home the way you envision it.'8

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1 Marjetica Potrc, Next Stop Kiosk, Moderna Galerija Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2003, p. 40
2 http://potrc.org/project2.htm
3 Stephanie Smith, Beyond Green: Towards a Sustainable Art, David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, and Independent Curators International, Chicago, 2005, p. 112
4 Marjetica Potrc: Urban Negotiation, IVAM Institut Valencia d'Art Modern, Valencia 2003, p. 38
5 Smith, Beyond Green, p. 110
6 Urban Negotiation, p. 14
7 Jan Verwoert, 'Confessions of a Global Urbanist', Afterall, no. 9, 2004, p. 51
8 Urban Negotiation, p. 35

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