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ART REVIEW; Anchor and Balm For Restless Souls

By ROBERTA SMITH

ONE of the best things about the "Art in the Anchorage" exhibitions organized each summer is the setting: the vaults of the Brooklyn Bridge anchorage, dark, mysterious and, these days, almost sinfully cool.

The anchorage's tall, narrow spaces make palpable the Industrial Revolution's promise of progress while reiterating the 19th-century's intermittent yearning for simpler times, preferably Gothic or Romanesque. Its arches and enormous blocks of stone evoke a castle's keep, or the neglected corner of a vast cathedral. But the anchorage also reveals the little-seen infrastructure of a legendary New York symbol. It is one of the hidden hearts of the metropolis, a place to meditate, at a slight remove, on New York's din and perpetual motion, indicated most immediately by the faint hum of traffic far overhead.

In bits and pieces, this year's anchorage exhibition, organized once again by the nonprofit group Creative Time, encourages such meditation. Titled "Affirmative Actions: Artists at Work," its selections often lack the physical ambition (read costliness) and political fervor of previous years, which means that overreaching is minimized. At times this show is rather sensitively, even poetically, site-specific, with many pieces prompting a viewer to consider the nature of city life for artists and nonartists alike.

The nine participants include both visual and performing artists and one theatrical group (the Foundry Theater, performing a play, "Deviant Craft," through Sunday). They take the exhibition's title at its word. Collaboration and community involvement are the operative principles here, with artists giving lectures, running workshops or involving outside participants in the execution of their work.

For example, Charles Dennis and Normando Ismay, identified in the show's brochure as "performance artists/community activists," collaborated with students from the nearby International High School and Gowanus Arts Exchange to create the colorful, Caribbean-style cabaret that is "Cafe Bizzoso." Complete with Expressionistic masks and figures and two small, brightly painted houses (one functional, one decorative), the installation is the setting for a monthlong open-mike cabaret.

Hope Sandrow's idea of community involvement is, in its own way, also local and focused. In the space allotted to her work, she organized "Material Matters," a group show of other artists, several of whom live near the anchorage. Its theme is marginalization, and the material in question is cardboard, boxes to be exact -- an apt metaphor for transience and marginality. One way or another, the boxes figure into every piece in the show, mostly as containers.

Among the eight artists are Robin Kahn, Matthew McCaslin and Jane Dickson, as well as John Yau, who contributes a bit of concrete poetry using "Fragile," the word most common to cardboard. Especially good is Susan Leopold's "Imminently Perilous," in which camera, watercolors and tiny three-dimensional models take the viewer on a tour of the artist's studio and its nearby Brooklyn streets and into a complicated examination of perspective, illusion and perception itself.

Sara Pasti has nervily piggybacked a second group show onto Ms. Sandrow's with "195-120 Front Street: A Multiple-Dwelling of the Mind." This walk-in closet of stacked boxes displays works by the residents of Ms. Pasti's Brooklyn loft building, conjuring some of the stylistic diversity and claustrophobia endemic to multiple-artist dwellings. Emily Feinstein makes the best of the situation, treating several boxes as rooms and adding windows and awkwardly carpentered furniture that is small in size but large in scale.

Some pieces seem too literal or limited. Karin Giusti has built a large model of the Brooklyn Bridge from locally foraged debris. Maura Sheehan's contribution is a half-pipe, the steeply curved plane that is every skateboarder's idea of heaven, but it seems like a funky, ineffectual piece of Minimalist sculpture when not in use. The best part of Tim Collins and Reiko Goto's incoherent installation is numerous bottles of aianthus leaves set on a thick cardboard base that turns out to be cut in the profile of the Brooklyn waterfront between the anchorage and Red Hook, a tribute to the hardy tree that anyone who has ever lived in a tenement apartment or near an empty lot will appreciate.

Joan Bankemper's "Medicinal Garden," near the entrance to the anchorage, is heartwarming, if not up to her best work. Ms. Bankemper is a veteran creator of idiosyncratic gardens, often portable; she is especially adept at recycling broken crockery and flowerpots into fantastical planters that are usable homages to Gaudi and to Simon Rodia, creator of the Watts Towers in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, such planters are virtually absent here. Still, Ms. Bankemper's garden, which arranges traditional medicinal plants in different plots according to which part of the body they benefit, is highly informative, and possesses the scruffy beauty of the city's communal gardens. (And visitors can work in it, along with the artist, in three two-hour stints each week.)

The collaboration offered by Ilya Kabakov, the Russian emigre who is the oldest and best-known artist in the exhibition, will be more limited: a discussion of Russian art and life conducted with his wife, Emilia, on Sept. 13. Still, community, specifically the strange nature of communal life in cities of the former Soviet Union, is prominent among the themes of Mr. Kabakov's often elegiac installations.

Here he contributes "The Flies," the disorientingly tilted corner of a bleak and decrepit communal kitchen. (It is the set for "The Flies: A Musical

Phantasmagoria," written and directed by the artist, which will have its premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in October.) Each of the kitchen's drab cupboards and shelves, sparsely dotted with pots and utensils, connotes a different family, just as the small single sink, small single stove and single door (a lavatory is implied) imply endless accommodation and a lack of privacy. The arrangement, hardly restricted to Russia, has sometimes been used in New York artist lofts, but usually by choice.

Betsy Newman's video installation "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is indebted to the poetic multiple-screen work of Mary Lucier, and even more to Walt Whitman's ode to Manhattan, Brooklyn and the river between them, which provides its title and the text for its soundtrack. Shuttling through images of the East River, rain-splattered sidewalks and a handsome tieless man (read sensitive intellectual) on the Staten Island Ferry, Ms. Newman follows, almost too literally at times, Whitman's imagery as it swings between grand vistas and immediate detail. But the piece still has its moments, especially in this setting, and its conjunctions of word and image often vividly evoke the visual pleasures of the city, its sights, its rhythms, its people.

With its almost ecstatic empiricism, Whitman's poem celebrates the transcendent nature of everyday sights, both manmade and not. But it is also an early articulation of a new kind of esthetic urban experience: that introspective solitude in the midst of strangers so particular to big cities, with their sprawling parks and public transportation systems. This populous solitude still ranks high among New York's many attractions for artists and writers, long after Brooklyn's ferry has given way to its mighty bridge.

"Art in the Anchorage 1995" continues through Sept. 14 at the base of the Brooklyn Bridge, at Cadman Plaza West in Brooklyn. Exhibition hours: Thursday through Sunday from 1 to 6 P.M. Information: (212) 206-6674.

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