



VIVAN SUNDARAM HOUSE/BOAT

PLUG IN, SEPTEMBER 29 TO OCTOBER 11
CURATED BY WAYNE BAERWALDT

BY ED JANZEN

Indian artist Vivan Sundaram's "House/Boat" is a desperate, immediate expression of home, dislocation and second home. It evokes humanity's will to survive, to make order out of chaos, to heal, even while being simultaneously lacerated by the upheavals of industrial culture.

Originally from New Delhi and having studied at M.S. University in Baroda, Sundaram's work is deeply grounded in east Indian politics and social life. As exhibition co-curator Brian Mulvihill explains, the show's political genesis is in the shantytowns around the metropolis of Bombay, where millions of people dislocated by industrialism scrape together lives for themselves by working any kind of job they can find and collecting and using discarded materials to build with. The poverty and desperation of the shantytown dwellers is frequently twisted back on them by political and business interests. Mulvihill:

"Partly it's the developers. These shantytowns have grown up around Bombay and land is extremely valuable. It's hard to get rid of those people, because some of them have been there for two generations. There are laws to protect them; you can't just take over their shantytowns. So, if you can stimulate a riot by

throwing a cow's head into a Hindu temple or a pig's head into a Muslim mosque, and that turns into a mass riot, then that's an excuse for the police and the army to move in. The developers are there the next morning and they're going to put up a 50-story tower. So this is pretty orchestrated."

The boat-component of "House/Boat," a story of dislocation and dispossession, was inspired by just such provocative bluster on the part of a certain right-wing, Bombay politician. As Mulvihill explains:

"This guy Bal Thaktry says that all the foreigners should leave Bombay and, if they do not, they were just going to make a boat and round them up and put them out to sea. The foreigners working in Bombay ... are actually Bangladeshi and, to a certain degree, Pakistani — they're Muslims. So they're born there, been there two or three generations, although they're not actually Indian citizens. Really, [Thaktry's] saying that all the Muslims should get out of Bombay."

Hundreds of millions of people around the world can no longer claim a natural home and this makes them nearly defenseless against further dislocations. Once an ancestor leaves home to look for work in the industrial world, meaningful ties to home are easily lost. And even after two or three generations living in some new home, people still often lack the ability to defend their presence in that location, if challenged. The roots, once cut, are virtually impossible to grow back. Forever after, the people are easily made to pack up and leave.

According to Mulvihill, the boat in "House/Boat" represents this almost-pathological rootlessness: "It's like the boat has washed ashore in some part of Bombay, perhaps like the boat that the people came from Bangladesh on. But the journey has been severed and the tradition is over. Great migrations came out of the process the Industrial Revolution. There was a transportation network set up and people began to move and get jobs in larger cities. They didn't have their own means of transport. But the journey is long over. But often, several generations later, they're

[again] forced to leave, and then it's all over. This is a sort of symbol of that context, this whole process of the twentieth century, with its huge migrations.

"The aspiration of India [to the status of] a nation-state was a British invention. Now, after independence, all these kinds of disruptions and rearrangements are working out of all those very complicated histories. They've come there [Bombay] from some other place, but essentially, the people that come to Canada from China or India or Pakistan, over three generations, via Nairobi or London or wherever — if we said all the east Indians had to return to India, well, even their grandmothers were born in some other place. There is no home."

The show's other half is its house-component. "It's like a shanty house," says Mulvihill. "Just one single enclosure, a little window, made out of bits and pieces of whatever you can find. You get this kind of marking that just is a natural part of the human condition," he notes, referring to the rust-coloured stains and blotches of the walls of the hovel. "Walls take on the environment of the industrial community. Shantytowns are usually around big factories, where people can get work loading ships, [or doing] all that unskilled labour that is the backbone of the industrial process. They're not educated, they're never going to rise up and get a full-time job."

Still, a home is a home, and the process of domestication — of turning rubbish into living space — continues of necessity and without relent, even in the most grinding adversity. It is a home both borne of and invaded by the industrial environment. Without better options, people appropriate pieces of the industrial environment and use them to hold that same environment

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at bay. Says Mulvihill: "Here in Winnipeg, if you went to the railroad tracks or the poor parts of town, you'd find all kinds of old bits of metal, old cars, discarded objects. People construct their homes and their lives out of them in these huge, modern, industrial cities, not only in India, but in South America, Africa and New York City. In Vancouver, a lot of people are living on skid row and they've built in a backlane or under a bridge and they're sleeping there. It's part of the industrial world."

Sundaram is careful to differentiate between forms of industry. Surrounded by the industrial behemoth of mass-production and the yoke of British mercantilism, the Indian people responded in a novel and somewhat paradoxical fashion — by taking control of production through the use of traditional methods. Traditional industry figures prominently in the materials used to construct both the boat and the house, specifically the paper. "This is a kind of very thick, handmade paper," notes Mulvihill. "Mahatma Gandhi set up all these ashrams to make local cotton and paper, as a reaction against the British, who took materials from India and wove them on industrial looms and then sold them back to the Indians. As a way to counterbalance that, Gandhi encouraged people to go back to their traditions and make their own cloth, get their own salt out of sea water — all things to counterbalance the global industrialization of their economy."

"It's a very thick paper that's used for construction. It's used for making shantytown dwellings. It's extremely strong and durable, and it's made from recycled cotton, old paper, so it's a

real village kind of economy. These are made in the original Gandhi ashram in Ahmadabad."

The central feature of the house's interior is a hearth occupied by a video screen, bathed in a gentle, golden glow from above. Traditionally, the hearth has been the centre of even the most modest house, being the source of sustenance, nourishment and, ultimately, life itself. But in this house, the traditional hearth is juxtaposed with industrialism, represented by the screen. Just as the television has largely replaced the hearth as the central feature of the Western house, the culture of industrialism is just as invasive in far-off India.

Sundaram brings us closer to the condition of the Indian poor, to the tension between the two contradictory processes of domestication and industrialization. People fight to erect their shelters and create their living spaces, even as the crushing weight of the industrial world seeps in through the walls like stains of rust. In "House/Boat," we see the winnerless contest between these opposite vectors and are taught something about the meaning of struggle. •

PLUG-IN UNIVERSITY NODE

Peer Cook

The University Node was an exercise to discover what happened to the various notions of gradual infill, replacement and regeneration of parts on to a Plug-in City megastucture; but with a specific kind of active Peter Cook was at this time working with a group of students who were also looking at the future of units as institutions — and at new ways of teaching. The sequence below anticipates the loosening-up of parts. It 'always-complete-but-never-finished' nature of Archigram projects continues from now (1962) onwards.

The main enclosures are simply tensioned skins hung on trays which collectively create the 'hulls'. Each skin can have a standard metal base and can choose to have it located anywhere on the design. In a sense, this anticipates the 'hollow' nature of subsequent projects.

The nature of Plug-in City, involving the replacement of one function by another (though accepting the set location), could be demonstrated and a more intense glimpse of the likely detail of rooms, M-tubes, stairs a even land-raisings disclosed.

Die Universitätsknoten war eine Übung, um herauszufinden, was eigentlich in Einzelfall passiert, wenn in so solchen Megastuktur Teile ergänzt, ersetzt, umgewandelt werden. Wir suchten dafür ein spezifisches Projekt. Peter Cook arbeitete damals gerade mit einer Gruppe Studenten, die sich Gedanken machten um die Zukunft der Universität als Institution und über neue Wege der Lehre. Die abgebildeten Schritte simulieren eine langsame Auflösung. Die Archigram-Projekte, die "immer vollständig, aber niemals fertig" sein sollten, werden von 1965 an weiterverfolgt.

Die äußere Verkleidung ist nichts weiter als eine zwischen die Geschossebenen gespannte Haut, die umhüllt kollektiven Raum, jeder Student bekommt eine Metallkappe und kann sich wachen, wo sie aufgestellt werden soll. Damit ist der Normalentwurf, ein Merkmal der späteren Entwürfe, teilweise schon vorweggenommen.

Die Organisation von Plug-in City in der eine Funktion die andere (am gleichen Ort) ersetzen kann, wurde noch einmal deutlich, und auch die Eigenschaften der Räume, der Aufzugsdröhren, der Außenhaut und selbst Handläufe ließen sich genauer bestimmen.

Die
Organisation
von Plug-in
City