
Dan Peterman

Options 48: Dan Peterman

**PUB
Archive**

1994.12

c.2

Options 48: Dan Peterman

Dan Peterman's latest project, *Sulfur Cycle*, is for the artist a journey through terrain at once familiar and new. Over the past seven years, Peterman has received international recognition for works that focus on the "postconsumer" life of aluminum, plastics, and glass and on recycling systems including composting, water purification, and the removal of toxic contaminants. His works, especially those utilizing aluminum and plastic, might be seen as forming a series. Using waste aluminum, Peterman has produced works as varied as *Medium of Exchange* (1987), in which he melted aluminum cans into simple castings, placed them in various sites around the city, and tracked, via a numbering system, their redeposit in recycling centers; *Composition en plein air/Composition Out of Doors* (1989), in which he placed eight hundred pounds of crushed aluminum cans on a shipping pallet for an exhibition at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (the French title and glistening surface being droll references to the famous impressionist collections of the adjacent Art Institute); *Model Efficiency* (1989), a "model" homeless shelter constructed out of blocks of crushed aluminum cans; and a number of crushed aluminum can "coins," the size of which reflects in hundred-dollar units the material's value if recycled (*Small Change* [1989] in the MCA's permanent collection consists of three of these coins).



Plastics recycling has been the basis for a number of more recent works. They range from *Recycled Plastic Tire* (1990), an unusable tire fashioned from segments of recycled plastic, to a series of *Reconstruction Block* pieces (also 1990) in which Peterman fabricated minimalist variations on a rectangle out of planks of recycled plastic. *Untitled* (1993) is a large picnic table made from planks of recycled plastic milk containers.

Peterman's materials and subject matter reflect the artist's long association with The Resource Center in Hyde Park, where he has kept a studio since his student days at the University of Chicago. The location was formerly an active neighborhood take-in site. It was here that the easy availability of materials and an intriguing conceptual problem—the discrepancies between sophisticated systems for the design, manufacture, and distribution of consumer products and the much less sophisticated efforts to deal with the waste these products all too quickly become—intersected to provide the artist with a rich resource.

As tempting as it is to call him an "environmental artist," Peterman is one only in the scientific sense of the term. He works with large, interconnected natural and manmade systems, but the "save the world" colloquial meaning this term carries, with its moral and methodological implications, is not helpful in understanding Peterman's work. His approach is nonjudgmental; he looks at waste as yet another area of concern toward which creative problem solving can be applied. It is problem solving and the systems this process sets up, both for the artist and the viewer, that interest Peterman.

The artist's intent is not to save the world from pollution but to structure works of art. Peterman's works, by bringing attention to areas of everyday life common to all and ubiquitous in their presence, allow individuals to approach their own human essence through their shared humanity. All-too-human efforts to deal with human problems form a rich resource for engaging a viewer's mind and senses in a very personal way, in large, conceptual systems that might even be described as "real world" conceptual art. Pioneering conceptual artist Sol LeWitt's famous phrase comes to mind: "The idea is the machine that makes the art." Peterman elucidates interlocking social, political, and personal systems via often modest objects that he has transformed into repositories of the "idea machine"—an aesthetic means of processing vast bodies of knowledge about everyday life in the modern world. While "environmental consciousness" may be raised, challenging the viewer's aesthetic awareness is Peterman's ultimate goal.

Peterman's *Sulfur Cycle* moves into an area perhaps less visible in daily life, yet no less present than waste aluminum, plastics, or glass. Sulfur is an element with a natural cycle; it is vented by volcanic activity, enters the atmosphere, is absorbed into the oceans. Man's use of fossil fuels, however, has greatly altered the natural balance of the sulfur cycle. The burning of coal, in particular, has led to increased levels of sulfur dioxide in the atmosphere,



Model Efficiency
1989

Recycled Plastic Tire (RPT-1)
1990

which binds with water and is brought back to earth with rain. This "acid rain" is known to everyone, yet the interrelated governmental, industrial, and financial systems that have been developed over the past few years to deal with acid rain are little known.

It is these systems, formed in response to the 1990 Clean Air Act, that Peterman deals with in the present exhibition. Here he offers a variety of entry points for the viewer into a complex of regulatory efforts, technological advances in pollution control and manufacturing systems, and emission rights sold in the financial markets. In the following statement Peterman raises a series of provocative questions that help one navigate the environment of the *Sulfur Cycle*. The present exhibition should be seen as a beginning point, as the drywall on display will be used to complete a permanent display in the MCA's new building on Chicago Avenue, marked by the artist to record the sulfur locked within it.

Lynne Warren

Curator, Special Projects



Sulfur Cycle



Midwestern high-sulfur coal (2–4% sulfur content).

Bailly generating station, Chesterton, Indiana.

There is nothing unusual about finding gypsum wallboard in an art museum. It is, after all, what the walls are made of. Exhibited in the gallery, new and unused, it has a heightened physical, even sculptural, presence, but it remains ordinary wallboard destined for use in the Museum of Contemporary Art's new building. The sulfur dioxide pollution rights transactions—courtesy of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Chicago Board of Trade—while representing a novel approach to environmental problems, simply extend rather ordinary economic principles. The connecting element here is the sulfur, and yet while it is real, present in the gallery and measured in tons, it also remains abstractly represented and invisible. How then should a viewer proceed? A basic understanding of the overall scheme is perhaps necessary in order to make sense of these components.

The sulfur involved in this project is derived from coal that is burned by large, electricity-producing utilities. Emissions from the incineration of coal are a major cause of acid rain as the process releases large quantities of sulfur (in the form of sulfur dioxide) into the atmosphere. In response to the problem of sulfur dioxide emissions, some utilities have installed smokestack scrubbing systems that use a limestone slurry to absorb sulfur before it is released into the atmosphere. In these systems limestone and sulfur chemically bond, forming a synthetic gypsum. On an experimental basis this gypsum is beginning to replace naturally occurring sources of gypsum in the manufacture of wallboard. What this means is that gypsum wallboard can be considered a reservoir or archive of sulfur diverted from the atmosphere. The six tons of drywall presented here collectively contain one ton of sulfur.

This sulfur "transaction" represents a complex blend of ecological and economic factors. Its complexity stems from the inability to address with accuracy the true costs of environmental degradation. Most economic assessments overlook intricate cause and effect relationships linked to ecological change and ignore the slow diminishment of resources in quality or quantity. This occurs despite widespread awareness of pollution issues and despite the fact that the impact of pollution upon ecological systems increasingly affects economic systems. In this installation, the sulfur in the wallboard has two values: one as a component in the marketplace of building materials and another as an inert reservoir of displaced pollution.

Below
Absorption grid formula.

The 1990 Clean Air Act, which called for a fifty-percent reduction in national sulfur emissions by the year 2000, laid the groundwork for a pollution-trading market that would begin establishing the “true” costs of high sulfur pollution more accurately. The Chicago Board of Trade, authorized by the EPA, developed such a market whereby one-ton sulfur dioxide emission rights are currently bought and sold.¹ This recently devised market “architecture” is a striking companion to the wallboard industry; now as a coal-burning utility becomes increasingly efficient, i.e. directs increasing amounts of sulfur into the wallboard industry, it can sell its unused emission rights in the open marketplace.

These developments present some interesting conditions for the general public. It is now possible for a consumer to acquire tons of diverted sulfur by purchasing wallboard for building and remodeling projects and then to acquire the corresponding rights to emit the sulfur into the atmosphere. Though there is a degree of absurdity to this idea as there is no simple way to release sulfur from walls, the units of exchange, degrees of accountability, and rules and manners of ownership are being spelled out nonetheless. We find ourselves inextricably complicit in their development.



The ecological, ethical, economic, and even aesthetic factors at play provide very different value structures. Once confronted, the materials at stake in this project are difficult to ignore; they have real effects and occur in substantial amounts measured in tons. Still, their significance, at least in economic terms, can be deceptive. In a recent Board of Trade auction of emission rights, for example, a five-ton purchase costing about \$1,200 was considered negligible and rounded off to zero in the summary of auction results. What to the market is insignificant is immense when confronted here. Thus we enter a vast territory where small-scale or private ecological initiatives border on futility or absurdity. By dividing the airspace over the United States by the number of American citizens, do we arrive at some cubic volume that an individual is entitled to pollute or is responsible for protecting? Should individuals be trading pollution rights as well? How much sulfur can be accounted for by a person's use of electricity over a single lifetime, or by an art museum over its lifetime?

If we choose to examine sulfur a bit further, we learn that we are already interwoven into a complex global sulfur cycle, a natural economy based on the decay of living organisms, volcanoes, erosion by water, and other factors. In light of the bigger picture, are man-made interventions in the ecosystem of any consequence? Can the diverted sulfur content in the reservoir of the museum, for example, be rounded off to zero and still carry meaning?

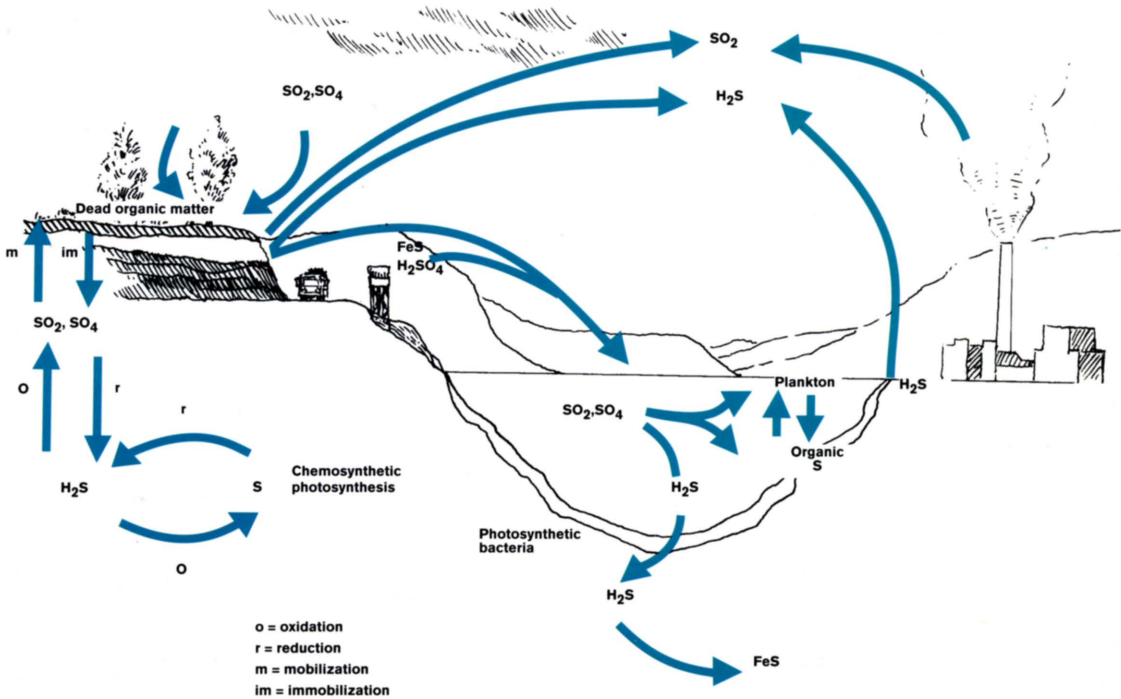
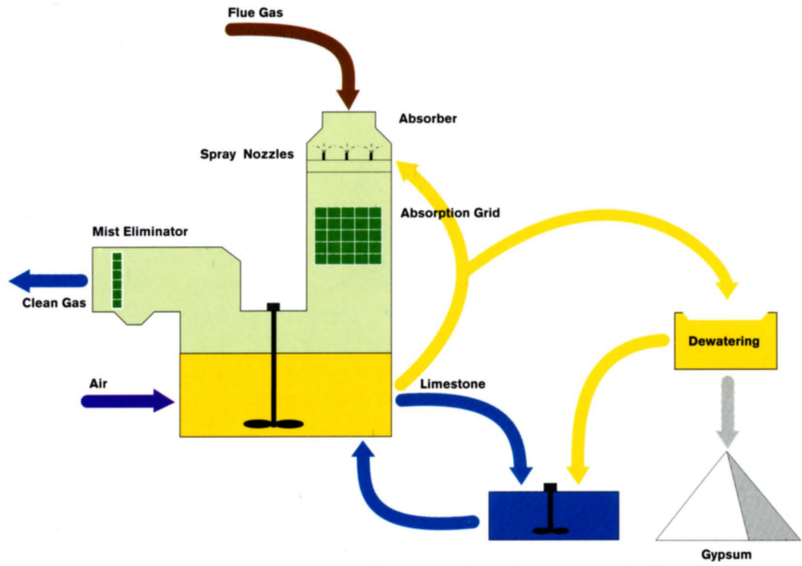
In this exhibition one won't find a finished artwork but instead an introduction to an ongoing discussion and negotiation. It will be fleshed out, so to speak, in the Museum of Contemporary Art's new building when the wallboard from this installation is archived in the museum's walls. But this won't close the discussion. The emission rights presented here will not expire until the year 2001. Until then they remain transient, negotiable, marketable entities. Over time, perspectives on what this all means, what values are at stake within the context of the museum or within society in general, are likely to change. What will be undeniable, however, is that the sulfur will be there, in the walls, in the permanent collection one might say, and not in the atmosphere. How, after all, do we determine the meaning that lies in that?

Dan Peterman

1 Rather than focusing on the "command and control" approach of previous environmental policy, where companies are ordered to apply specific, often inefficient or inappropriate pollution control technology, the Clean Air Act leaves open a much broader number of options for meeting required reductions, including a market approach for trading and selling emission rights. Depending on the market price for the limited supply of such rights, companies could find it economically advantageous to seek alternative ways of dealing with their emissions. Smokestack "scrubbers" are one example.

Right
Flue gas desulfurization
system.

Below
The sulfur cycle.





Biography

Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1960; lives in Chicago
 University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, B.F.A. 1983
 University of Chicago, M.F.A. 1986

Solo Exhibitions

- 1994 Galerie Tanja Grunert, Cologne, Germany
- 1993 F.R.A.C. Poitou-Charentes, Angoulême, France
- 1992 *Standing Below Grade*, N.A.M.E., Chicago
- 1991 Randy Alexander, New York
- 1990 *Une Douzaine de Tasses (More or Less)*, Artpool, Montpellier, France
- 1989 *Thank You for Your Patronage: Chairs From Street Carts*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
- 1988 *The Chicago Compost Shelter*, The Resource Center, Chicago

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1994 *Universe*, John Gibson Gallery, New York
- Life is too much*, Galerie des Archives, Paris
- 1993 *Recycling Reconsidered*, Indianapolis Museum of Art (exh. cat.)
- Enclosure*, New York Kunsthalle, New York (exh. cat.)
- Kontext Kunst*, Steirischer Herbst, Trigon '93, Graz, Austria (exh. cat.)
- Oppositionen und Schwesterfelder*, Vienna Secession, Vienna (exh. cat.)
- Backstage*, Hamburg Kunstverein, Hamburg (exh. cat.)
- Aperto*, Venice Biennale (exh. cat.)
- Simply Made in America*, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CN
- New Works*, Feigen, Inc., Chicago
- 1992 Galerie Tanja Grunert, Cologne, Germany
- Replay: Art That is Serious/Playful*, William E. Gahlberg Gallery, Arts Center, College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, IL (exh. cat.)
- 1991 *Installations for New Spaces*, Chicago Cultural Center
- MUD, or How Can Social and Local Histories Be Used as Methods of Conservation*, Hirsch Farm Project, Hillsboro, WI (exh. cat.)
- Empty Pedestals Project*, Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York (exh. brochure)
- 1990 *One More One Less*, N.A.M.E., Chicago
- 1989 *Charged Spaces: Stressed Sites in the Body Politic*, Betty Rymer Gallery, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (exh. brochure)
- Filling In the Gap*, Feigen, Inc., Chicago (exh. brochure)
- Sculpture Chicago '89*, Cityfront Center, Chicago (exh. cat.)
- 1988 *The Whole World is Still Watching*, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago (exh. brochure)
- Latitudes: Focus on Chicago*, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO (exh. cat.)
- 1987 *Urban Processes: Circuits and Sediments*, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago

©1994. All rights reserved.
 Museum of Contemporary Art
 237 East Ontario Street
 Chicago, Illinois 60611-3236



The MCA's *Options* exhibitions present the work of emerging artists and new work by more established artists. This exhibition is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. The MCA is funded in part by grants from the Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency that offers general operating support to the nation's museums, the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and by a CityArts 4 grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. Air transportation services provided by American Airlines, the official airline of the Museum of Contemporary Art.