

FILLING THE VOID

Mind the Gap
Smack Mellon Gallery
92 Plymouth Street, Brooklyn
Closed April 30



ALEX VILLAR / COURTESY SMACK MELLON GALLERY

Mind the Gap is a thought-provoking show at the Smack Mellon Gallery in DUMBO devoted to public art that intervenes in urban voids, attempting to make visible the spaces that are so often overlooked. Curators Eva Diaz and Beth Stryker gathered videos, performances, and installations by artists and activists who use leftover urban spaces as the departure point for their work. The show does not lack contradictions: How does one mount in a gallery setting works that, as the catalogue says, are "unexpected, clandestine, and unauthorized" interventions into the fabric of a city? How do you avoid the risk of romanticizing and aestheticizing these very spaces?

Mind the Gap features the work of 15 artists of different nationalities, many of them based in New York. Together, their works serve as an international typology of overlooked urban spaces, including, for example, Kyong Park's *Making It Better For You* (2000), a "fiction" on Detroit's urban plight; Ines Schaber's *just//temporary* (2001), a slide installation on Berlin's vacant lots; Azra Aksamija's *Arizona Road* (2002) a proposal scenario for the development of a market in Sarajevo; and

the Center for Urban Pedagogy's *Values & Variety* (2005), a project that looks at the cultural history of the Fulton Street Mall in downtown Brooklyn.

Alex Villar takes a literal and even comic approach to highlighting the empty small slivers of residual urban spaces. *Temporary Occupations* (2001) is a double-screen projection in which Villar jumps from decks, over fences, on terraces, through alleys, and into holes. Another gap, a banal and ordinary parking lot, takes on another quality when occupied by Michael Rakowitz's *Plot* (2004), a tent structure that simulates a covered car and playfully promises some temporary urban privacy. Marjetica Potrc's *Drawing Cities: The Struggle for Spatial Justice* (2004), a wake-up call on urban and civic tensions, is a series of colorful, cartoonish sketches that walk us through Amsterdam, Prishtina, and Tirana, and speak of scenarios of good cities and good citizens.

One of the works, John Hawke's and Sancho Silva's *Rest Area Open House* (2006), is an outdoor installation a few blocks away from the gallery. Of all the pieces in the show, this is the only to actually occupy an urban void,

and thus the easiest one to experience, and potentially the most radical. The piece—a temporary booth built with plywood, 2-by-4s, and orange safety netting—is in the street, curbside, just outside the Farragut Houses, a housing project on York Street. Using a map distributed by the gallery, I walked to it through the park that overlooks the East River and faces the city, passing hordes of people sunbathing, kite-flying, and picnicking. *Rest Area Open House* reads not as a work of art but as a makeshift shelter on a construction site. When I arrived, the installation was occupied, and my first impulse was not to enter. A police patrol was passing by and observing the structure's occupants, who at that moment were three young African-American men. I started talking to them. They told me that they live in the projects, and in the last few days had used the piece for socializing. It seemed that, other than these guys and the two artists who monitor the installation, the people who have shown the most interest in this installation were the police. Indeed, as soon as I left, the policemen approached the guys and told them to leave. When I came back, the guys called out to me,

A still from Alex Villar's 2001 *Temporary Occupations* (above); the sketches in Marjetica Potrc's *Drawing Cities: The Struggle for Spatial Justice* (below) focus on spatial politics in Prishtina, Kosovo.

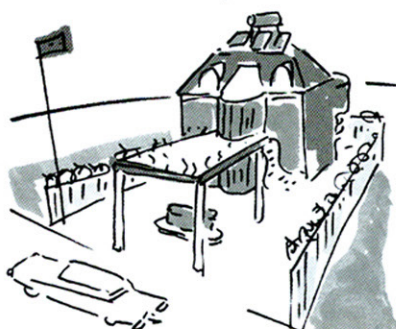
"You see what they do to us? We were not loitering, we were just hanging around."

Public space is now a hot theme for curators in New York: *Mind the Gap* focuses on a subject that is also currently being investigated in works at the 2006 Whitney Biennial, the New Museum's show on Andrea Zittel, *Critical Space*, and the Museum of Art and Design's *Beyond Green*. It is a vitally important issue, and my experience of the temporary rest

area on York Street is a powerful reminder of the hotly contested nature of public and open space in the city. (For example, apparently, parking spots are only usable by cars.) *Mind the Gap* raises more questions than it can answer, and moreover, leaves some obvious questions unasked, including the fundamental one: How public is public space?

OLYMPIA KAZI, FORMERLY A JUNIOR CURATOR AT THE TRIENNALE DI MILANO, IS A NEW YORK-BASED ARCHITECT.

WE SHALL DEFEND OUR ISLAND,
WHATEVER THE COST MAY BE,



CHOOSE YOUR FIGHT:
AN INDIVIDUAL IS THE SMALLEST STATE.
~ ROAD TO PRISTINA ~
BUT AM I A CITIZEN?
ARE WE A SOCIETY?

MARJETICA POTRC / COURTESY MAX PROTECH GALLERY