

New York

Steven Brower

Parker's Box

Many readers will recall the thrill of experiencing the first moon landing, albeit indirectly. The Cold War had launched the race into space. The fact that the United States had placed the first man on the moon suggested that in spite of the quagmire of Vietnam and the tumultuous events of '68, capitalism and American pragmatism were triumphing after all. The sky was no longer the limit. However, as one mission succeeded another, interest in space flight decreased and moon landings were eventually scrapped. Steven Brower's project consists of re-imagining the excitement of this bygone age by creating simulacra of some of the vehicles and equipment employed more than 30 years ago to explore the moon.

Brower relived the experience of producing tools for the risky business of space travel. His books and copious notes on the subject were available for perusal at the rear of the gallery. In the gallery's

front space stood *Nonfunctional, Surplus Hardware* (2004), a huge sculpture built up of titanium, aluminum, steel, copper, silver, inconel, plastic, wood, and paint to emulate the appearance of an Apollo Lunar Excursion Module. This silvery, faceted, irregular polygonal construction seemed remarkably fragile—almost as ephemeral as dreams of space exploration. The original prototype, a costly masterpiece of American technical engineering, became obsolete once it had fulfilled its purpose. A spacecraft isolated in the cramped space of a gallery is nonfunctional indeed.

One of the victims of the defunct Apollo moon missions is Conrad Carpenter, "the underemployed spaceman," Brower's alter ego, who made guest appearances at the gallery during the run of the exhibition, which was titled "Extravehicular Activity" (space jargon for the astronaut's activities beyond the protection of the spaceship). Brower painstakingly reconstructed *Conrad Carpenter's Training Spacesuit* (2003–04),

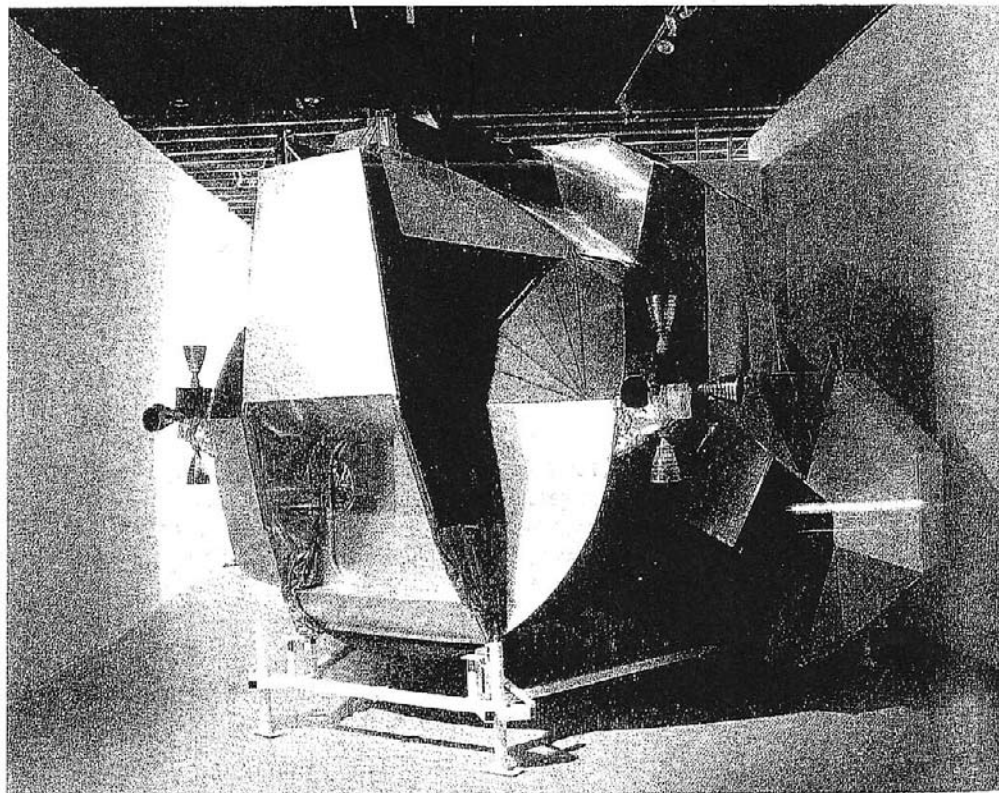
which hung limply against a wall. Since Brower makes everything himself, this project required that he learn a number of techniques that were unfamiliar to him, such as sewing and soldering. *It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time* (2001–03), a medium-sized construction of copper, brass, and wood, includes two revolving spheres powered by an electric motor. The words "Trauma," "Obsolete," "Lake of Error," "Ocean of Disappointment," "Sea of Inactivity," "Ocean of Doubt," and "Unemployment" are engraved onto the surface of the larger sphere, and "It Seemed Like A Good Idea at the Time" and "A Scale Model of Some of My Errors" are engraved onto the surface of the smaller one. Brower reveals the disillusionments that come of thwarted ambitions—a subject that artists, who venture into unknown territory without any guarantee of success, know all too well.

Brower reminds us that even the politically and scientifically motivated space program could be commercialized—another symptom of the triumph of capitalism. He provides us with *The Official Steve Brower Action Figger (Always Polite—Easily Manipulated—Hidden Talents—Self-Made Man)* and, in another vacuum-sealed package, the *Apollo Space Suit, ca. 1969*. *The first in a long series of accessories for the Steve Brower Action Figger that feature his many unrealized ambitions and nuanced failures.* In "Extravehicular Activity," Brower explores the plight of the artist, whose aims are inevitably frustrated—for the highest ideals defy materialization. He also plays with the artist's dependence on the commercial gallery to market his or her ideas and products: small oil-on-linen paintings of lunar landscapes depict the hoped-for destination; the aluminum hammer and pick-up scoop are ready for use; and the space suit merely needs to be pulled on.

Artists are people who share their dreams with other people.

Brower belongs to a long line of artists, going back to the mythical Daedalus, whose art, by being grounded in the principles of science, seeks to attain dignity. Additionally, his work suggests that the artist as problem-solver and inventor has a great deal to contribute to the worlds of engineering and science. However, what is gripping is that, in his playfulness, Brower does not make either of these cases too strongly. He knows that art is a luxury and that it is consequently useless—it merely offers us a method to confront or escape reality. He underscores this by re-creating replicas of tools used in a space program long defunct.

—Michaël Amy



Steven Brower, *Nonfunctional Surplus Hardware*, 2004. Titanium, aluminum, steel, copper, silver, inconel, plastic, and wood, installation view.