

## Steven Brower

Lombard/Freid Gallery

The information kiosk at the entrance to the Lombard/Freid Gallery is the tip-off. Innocuous ads for machinery, a business card or two, those ubiquitous handmade "for sale" posters, a brochure for the North American Model Engineers Exposition and a booklet (which doubles as the catalogue) hanging from a chain place us at an anonymous rest stop on the road to nowhere. A meticulously crafted homage to the mundane, this wooden booth sets the stage for "Utility," Steven Brower's rueful examination of art practice in the post-industrial age.

From the kiosk, wires stretch to the desk where the gallery director and assistants sit, turning the corner where they are caught up by miniature telephone poles. The phone rings. Power generated by this call moves through the wires and telephone poles to lift a gate in what looks like a reservoir and dam built into a toilet tank on a far gallery wall, releasing water into a bucket where a few plants grow. Below, running along the floor or rising at times to a foot's height, copper pipes circulate water from the bathroom through the gallery's public and private spaces. Drawing a line through the gallery space, the pipes bestow the whole installation with a jerry-built fragility that intermittently interrupts the leisure and pleasure of viewing.

Connected by the pipes and dependent on the gallery's resources for energy, each object becomes a link in a contiguous system of consumption and production. Near the reservoir, a water fountain stands ready to quench the traveler/viewer's thirst. Further on, a miniature observatory fixes its telescope on an artificial moon, whose painted simulation hangs on the neighboring wall. Several other small canvases, painted glimpses of forests or scenic vistas, hang on various walls alluding not only to natural sources of energy and to the act of viewing that usually occupies a gallery space but also to the artifice that underlines the whole display.

Interdependence abounds: the observatory conceals a tiny surveillance camera that in turn

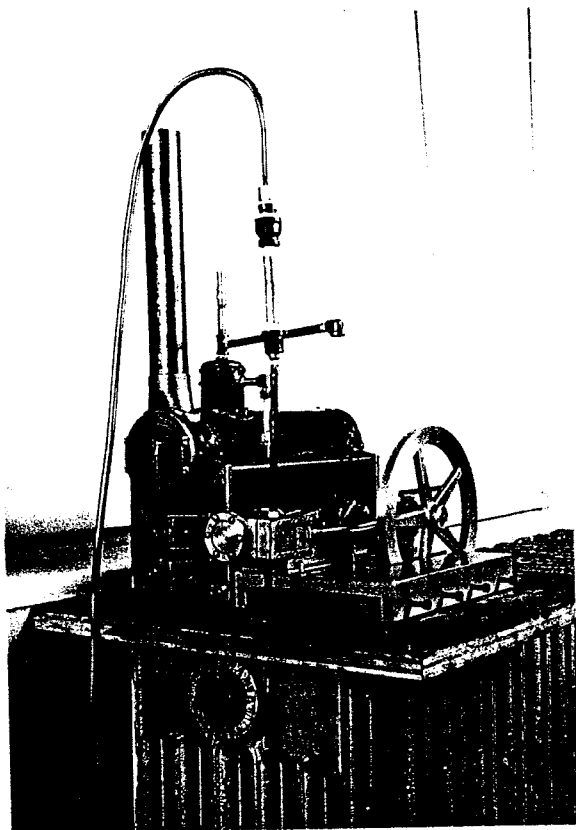
transmits the image of the moon to a small video screen placed in a scale model of the gallery fashioned out of museum board. The camera gains its power from the minuscule solar panels set atop a small-scale tower in the next room, which impassively harvests the sunlight from a nearby window. Not far away, a small steam engine attached to the gallery's radiator sends vaporized water to a scale

deliberately evoke the nostalgia of times past. Reminding the viewer of the humble origins of modern industry, the steam engine, dam, solar tower, observatory, architectural models, even the paintings advance the beauty of the machine, the value of work, and the visionary quest of the creator/inventor. Yet this romantic idyll does not last long, as one quickly realizes that everything

Indeed the whole installation is set in motion by the energy generated by the marketplace. Moving from the distribution of raw resources to the manufacturing of commodities leading to sales, everyone and everything is caught up in constructing a system of production and exchange, including the artist whose practical and productive labor services the industry of culture. Even the

be controlled. By reminding us of the fiction of contemporary existence where a fascination with gadgets, consumer goods, and illusion fed by advertisement tricks us into believing that we can be masters of our universe simply by repeating the cycle of consumption, "Utility" artfully demonstrates the fallacy and pretension of such desire. In the end only nostalgia and artifice remain, for the only thing a perpetual motion machine, like culture, can really do is to find yet another reason to endlessly reproduce itself.

—Susan M. Canning



Left: Steven Brower, *Steam Plant (Boiler and Steam Engine)*, 1999. Aluminum, brass, copper, and steel, 16.5 x 4.5 x 11 in. and 6.25 x 15 x 15 in. Above: *Dam and Reservoir*, 1999. Plastic, metal, and paint, 12 x 21.75 x 9.5 in.

model of a treatment plant where it is then piped back either to the water fountain or to the backroom kitchen sink, completing the circuit.

Water, electricity, heat, waste disposal, the telephone: utilities, taken for granted, even overlooked, form the infrastructure that governs the flow of daily life. Nourished by the energy of these resources and performing in the fissure of function and aesthetic, Brower's handmade objects

here is literally an invention, a crafted fabrication whose doubled reading underscores the fiction that is art. As models, Brower's machines replicate the ways in which we are dependent upon and controlled by the systems of power. As art objects shown, interpreted within, and intimately linked to the economy of the gallery, these maquettes examine the link between power and culture.

art dealers and their assistants must check in and out on a wooden time clock to document their work effort.

In the catalogue/booklet that accompanies the show, Brower writes about the perpetual motion machine, a device which aimed to replicate nature by becoming so reliable it could be ignored. Over the centuries, this elusive goal resulted in inventions that glorified ingenuity and promised a better world even as they replicated the difficulty of trying to master that which cannot totally