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The Ontology of the Bagel Cart

by Martin Lucas

When artist Jeanne van Heeswijk first told me that she was intrigued by the ubiquitous bagel carts of New York City, I was not surprised. The person who could make a piece like 'Room with a View' that features a living space for cultural production capable of being taken apart and reassembled on demand in new locations is obviously in the market for a practical answer to the problem of mobile art. And anyone who visits New York can not help but admire our happy solution to the ongoing difficulties of providing several million citizens with their coffee and bagels in a timely (average waiting time less than 100 seconds) and inexpensive (\$1.00 for coffee and bagel in bag with napkin) manner.

The basic building material of the carts is stainless steel. Clean and functional, the carts evoke the sleek diners of the 1940s which once fed America. But if the carts are the descendants of the fast food palaces of another era (they often built on the basis of abandoned trolley cars), these are pygmy offspring, designed for a more nomadic age. And despite their machine-age aesthetic, these are individually designed units, made one by one in a pre-corporate style. In this the carts resemble small homes more than automobiles, and since they provide the simple necessities of shelter, heat and water for their workday residents, they qualify, if not as homes, at least as workspaces as meaningful to the city as the office towers whose occupants provide the lines of customers who wait impatiently for their coffee and bagel every weekday morning on the streets of New York City.

New York's unique combination of high population density (at least North American standards) and a long-standing tradition of street culture, together with a continuous competition for the eye, not to mention the nose, of New Yorkers, has resulted in a unique array of street stalls. The hotdog cart, some even with wooden cart wheels and cloth umbrellas, can still be seen on the streets, while folding card tables provide sufficient support for the wares of street vendors of everything from used books to cheap watches.

Why a bagel cart?

Galerie Casco is a storefront art space in the general confines of Utrecht's Oudegracht. Since it opened in 1991 it has focused on public space, democratic design and other areas of conflict and crossover between public, corporate and private spheres of experience. But as successive projects pushed conceptual boundaries to the limits, Casco functioned less and less as an exhibition space and was in danger, according to Project Manager Wendel ten Arve, of losing touch with the public. Enter Jeanne van Heeswijk, public-space artist.

'I immediately thought of Abdul, my bagel guy', said Van Heeswijk. 'There was something about that relationship. Every morning on the corner of 38th and Park Avenue, there he was with his cart. And he always had something to say, "Sorry, out of poppy seeds today." "A plain with butter to go with your tea?" "I didn't see you last week. Were you out of town?" 'I thought, here is someone who makes a real connection every day.'

'You know, here in the Netherlands there's this phrase, a critique of

non-object based art. "It's just about coffee drinking", they say disparagingly. And I wanted to challenge that idea. I mean, okay, but serving coffee is a serious urban intervention. If you want to reach a public on a street level, maybe coffee is the way to do it.' Once Van Heeswijk got her okay, she asked Abdul for help. 'No problem', he told her. These quintessentially New York vehicles are made in Queens. The builders are a family of Uzbek immigrants who build the carts to order depending on the needs and finances of the cart operator. A couple of visits to the factory, a careful sketch, and \$4000 later, the Cascomobile was ready to load on a ship for its trip to Rotterdam harbour. The Cascomobile as it stands is basically a box, 1.5 x 2 x 2.2 metres, mounted on wheels and featuring heat, lights and a canteen-style American coffee maker. In front furnishes ample display space on 3 wraparound shelves, and a plexiglas-topped back door provides easy access for the occupant. Seating is included as benefits a space designed for a full day of work. The end result, so common as to be practically invisible on the streets of new York, definitely constitutes as 'atypisch element' in its new Dutch setting. A quick survey reveals that the bagel cart fills a new ecological niche, larger than the ice cream pushcarts on the one hand, and much smaller than the motorized vans selling spring rolls and French fries on the other. The rationalism of the design and the outdated futuristic look add to making the cart stand out. And this of course is all to the good as far as Van Heeswijk is concerned.

For her, it was what a bagel cart has and doesn't have that makes it so ideal. 'You're not just on the street. You're autonomous,' she told me. 'It's the perfect small business unit. The carts are set up for three things - service, display and mobility in an urban context. Precisely what Casco needed.'

But what happens when you remove a bagel cart from its native asphalt and transport it across the Atlantic to the streets and plazas of Utrecht? The initiation of 'Casco, Coffee and Communication' found Van Heeswijk in her cart at Utrecht's Stadhoudersbrug. The vehicle, vetted by transportation authorities as a towed vehicle, and by the police for its use of bottled gas, carried coffee, tea and a variety of information about Casco's activities, past and present, all for free, as well as offering art, such as Rolf Engelen's 'Second Chance Plants', for sale.

'Of course, people were puzzled at first. I mean we were offering them coffee for free. Finally word would get around a that it really was free, but people still kept waiting for us to try to sell them something', said Van Heeswijk. She and the Casco mobile circled out from the city centre, hitting five different locations during May 2001. which concluded phase one of the project. Every night the cart was towed back to its home on the Oudegracht. 'Even that was a bit of a problem', noted Van Heeswijk, 'the front windows were taken out and replaced with French doors - and the ceiling had to come out too/ Fortunately Lisette [Smits, director of Casco - Ed.] really believed in the idea.'

As a New Yorker I'm a fan of our local carts, but one must ask whether we aren't merely talking some kind of cultural colonialism here. Is a bagel cart in Utrecht just another example of American hegemony? Maybe, but unlike MacDonal'd's golden arches, or Frank Gehry's soaring curves, the bagel cart is a degree zero of urban architecture. As markerless as a thatched hut, it represents a kind of folk architecture, operating the purview of 'designed design'.

In another effort to address the question of what it might mean to take a New York bagel cart on a tour of the Netherlands, I turned to George Basalla's study, 'The Evolution of Technology'. What interests Basalla about technology, is exactly how new environments alter transplanted objects, even machine-made ones:

'A tool or contrivance that has been designed to function in one natural setting often must be altered if it is to work properly in a new

environment. ... A brief look at the artifactual world today reveals that automobiles, telephones, household appliances, and television sets, to name a few, have undergone changes. ... Each of these artefacts was altered to conform to changing circumstances and patterns of usage as they were introduced into different countries. .. A comprehensive theory useful in explaining artifactual variation through adaptation is not yet available.' In the absence of theoretical support, the answer to the question of cultural translation must be an empirical one. Typically, Van Heeswijk, who has billed herself as an 'artist without qualities', involves other artists in her projects, and the Cascomobile is 'no' exception. The second artist to employ the cart is Apolonija Sustersic. Her piece, 'Home Design Service', took her and the cart to the gigantic Leidsche Rijn housing development.

For Sustersic, the role of the cart in its New York context is already second-hand information. It is the mobility of the cart which attracts her, allowing her to comment on the gaps in planning practice that allow 30,000 homes to be built with next to no thought for basic services. I interviewed Sustersic in situ on a parking strip near one of Leidsche Rijn's few stores.

Sustersic, who trained as an architect, provides home design services for the residents of this newly created city. She attempts to provide a missing link with an open air design centre, complete with catalogues, decor samples and, of course, plenty of coffee. Her work has led to some interesting encounters with clients in their own homes; several of these are viewable as videos at the Casco gallery.

If 'Rooms with a View' looked at what happens when you move from the concept of 'room' to the concept of 'a room' - explored as a meme of architectural thought where the personal and the social intersect - 'Casco, Coffee & Communication' takes the challenge of architectural signification to the streets. It is perhaps only some 200 years ago that the space of production was separated from the space of 'living' thereby divorcing the latter from the economics of life. The Cascomobile reintegrates life on the scale of the assimilable. Van Heeswijk's bagel cart is a rich, multilayered space, a space for living and working, an art space, a space for cultural production and consumption, an urban institution in fact.