

“THE RETURN OF FREE WATER” COMES TO LAAFF

Interactive Sculptural Installation Highlights Water Access Issues with Giant Flowers and Trees

When: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday, Sept. 9, 2007.

Where: The Lexington Avenue Arts & Fun Festival, corner of Lexington Avenue and Hiwassee Street, downtown Asheville, NC.

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Synopsis: “The Return of Free Water” is an interactive sculptural installation and educational exhibit that addresses the ecological, political, and social issues surrounding the issue of water access.

Conceived by multimedia artist Ilsa Door, the piece consists of a dozen 15-foot tall sculptures of flowers and trees made of used water and soda bottles. Each sculpture will be constructed by participants at festivals, public installations, and other public events at which the Return of Free Water will be displayed.

The first of these sculptures, a weeping willow tree built out of irrigation tubing and used water bottles, will be on display at the LAAFF festival and participants will be invited to take part in the construction of a second sculpture.

LAAFF goers will also be offered an opportunity to decorate water bottles and refill them at the willow tree, which will dispense filtered water for free.

In its final form, The Return of Free Water will comprise the flowers and trees, a “community well,” and a partially demolished fence with a sign saying that the well previously had been owned by a corporate soda company. Graffiti and holes in the fence will indicate that the privatized water source has since been returned to the public domain.

Informational kiosks will narrate the fictional account of a community that struggled against the influence of multinational corporations to reclaim its water supply. Real examples of similar conflicts that have taken place throughout the developing world (such as the water riots in Cochabamba, Bolivia) will be presented, as well.

The kiosks will also provide information about the environmental impact of the bottled beverage industry, as well as about water purity and other issues related to water rights. Video monitors and cameras will be built into the kiosks so that participants can give personal testimonials about their experiences of the installation and view other participants’ videos.

Inside the well, a display will invite participants to voice their wishes and hopes. These will be broadcast live from speakers at the bases of the flowers, as well as recorded to be incorporated into an evolving soundtrack that will accompany the installation.

The flowers themselves will fulfill a number of artistic and practical functions. One flower will provide clean, distilled water to anyone who wishes to fill a bottle. Another will provide cooling mists. Others will be covered in fabric, providing a screen for digital projections.

Participants also will be offered an opportunity to decorate reusable glass water bottles, which they can refill at the flowers.

Background

For many artists, the creative process is a way of translating personal experiences and challenges into more universal symbols. For multimedia artist Ilsa Door, a lifetime addiction to sodas was the catalyst for *The Return of Free Water*.

Having been raised on sodas, Door was drinking two liters a day by the time she was an adult. Though she tried to quit numerous times, she always returned to the habit.

It wasn't until age 33 that she found a deeper motivation than her health to quit: the ecological impacts of the soda industry through oil consumption, depletion of water resources and millions of tons of plastic bottles dumped into landfills each year.

"I didn't have the strength to quit just because it was bad for me," Door says. "But the fact that I comprehended the enormous impact that my daily buying decisions have on this world gave me the true strength to stick with it."

She still keeps her last bottle of Coca-Cola in a display at her studio to remind her of the damage to her health and to the environment that her decades-long addiction contributed to.

Meanwhile, Door had become increasingly involved in the Burning Man community. Burning Man, an annual arts festival that draws roughly 40,000 people to Nevada's Black Rock Desert, is founded around the principles of radical self-expression, participation, self-reliance and community. As part of that ethos, recycled art has become an increasingly common medium for artists there.

As she was pondering possible projects to take to Burning Man, her personal struggle with sodas kept coming up.

"I started thinking in terms of how the ecological impact helped me to quit sodas," Door says. "I realized that we need to hold a vision of what can happen if enough of us make that choice, and don't buy into it on a daily basis."

Turning to the Internet to research the environmental consequences of sodas, Door learned about another harm inflicted by the large cola manufacturers: the privatization of community water sources in much of the developing world.

"I kept seeing the image of a well covered in chains," she says. "I decided to cast my vision to beyond that."

A storyline began to unfold — one rooted in actual historical events, but projected into the future. She envisioned a community that struggled to take back its well after a soda company bought it and began selling water, once a free resource, back to the locals in the form of sodas.

"I tried to imagine what the spaces that they had taken over would be like if we managed to be successful in taking back our water," Door says. "After being so long without access to the well, I think that it would become a holy site."

The Return of Free Water is a monument to the success of those people's struggle.

For more information:

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