

*...machines that once dispensed death,
now offer affirmations of life...*

The



Art*o*mat

Transformational Vending Machines

It is amazing how we all become comfortable with the things that surround us...and they, in turn, represent our life.

-- Clark Whittington

BY AMY JO WOOD

Ordinary sounds can be powerful catalysts for the artist who knows how to listen. From the hollow *kerplunks* of quarters hitting metal in the bottom of a vending machine, to the crinkling of cellophane when opening a pack of peanut butter crackers, the noise of daily life resonates with the potential to inspire original ways of thinking.

For conceptual artist Clark Whittington, creator and founder of Art*o*mat, it was, in fact, a friend's Pavlovian urge to buy vended products after hearing the sound of cellophane that inspired him to form Artists in Cellophane (A.I.C.), the sponsoring organization of Art*o*mat.

Art*o*mat's are refurbished cigarette machines that dispense original works of art the size of a cigarette pack in galleries and museums across the country. Most Art*o*mat pieces sell for \$5 each, with a portion of the profits going to arts-related charities.

Amy-Jo Wood is an Art*o*mat contributor, watercolor painter, and writer living in High Point, North Carolina. Her book, *Life Between Azalea Festivals*, is available at amazon.com. Contact her at amyjowood@earthlink.net.

Currently, Art*o*mat represents 240 artists from eight countries. Although the artists are paid for their work when it sells, that is clearly not their primary motivation to participate in the project. From Muslim women artists in Bangladesh to a Fundamentalist Christian in a nursing home that signs his work, "God Loves You," the reasons for participating in Art*o*mat are as diverse as the artists involved.

Several say they find it gratifying that "machines that once dispensed death now offer affirmations of life." Others delight in the metaphysical aspect of their art "connecting with strangers without ever knowing the receiver's reaction." And quite a few just think the whole idea is "cool!" The spiritual aspect of the project which most of the artists seem drawn to is the idea of simply putting their work into the world in hopes of bringing joy, enlightenment, bemusement, or even a question to those who come in contact with their pieces.

The Art*o*mat project began in 1997 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina when a friend noticed a drawing of a vending machine in Clark Whittington's sketchbook. The friend located a recently banned cigarette machine in the old tobacco town, and convinced Clark to begin vending his artwork. In June of that year, the first Art*o*mat was installed at Penny University (now Mary's, Of Course Cafe), with 12 of Clark's paintings and photographs selling for \$1.00 each.

Since then, this industrious visionary has refurbished 38 machines, all works of art in themselves. They can be found at the Whitney Museum in New York, Diverseworks! in Houston, and at The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) at The Geffen Contemporary, Los Angeles, Ca., among many others.

Clark considers himself a “spiritual, not religious” person, and says that “as the first Art*o*mat evolved into a broad project, I realized its great potential to connect people to people through art...what they take away from their encounter with the Art*o*mat work is totally up to them.”

He also respects the distinctive nature of each Art*o*mat. “I think of where it will be, and what type of people may interface with the machine. I am presently creating one for an art school in Philadelphia that will basically serve as a picture frame for the students to exhibit their own paintings inside the machine.”

Clark says a guy once told him that what he was doing was “right smart.”

“I realized then,” he states, “that these old machines were removing the social barriers to art. That is the best compliment an artist could ever receive.”



...❖The Art*o*mat Project artists

Garry Benet (*bags*) ...❖

Garry Benet of Charlotte, North Carolina has had shows throughout the United States and Europe, and has been working with resinated paper bags for four years. “The smallest versions find their way to Clark’s house and into his machines. The biggest bags that I have made are seven feet long and lay on the ground with one long side open. I call them homeless shelters.”



Naoko Higashi (*woven bead jewelry*) ...❖

Naoko is a Japanese artist who creates woven bead jewelry. She says her Art*o*mat pieces represent her need “to string together shiny things.”

Dawn Pierce (*earth works*)

Dawn Pierce lives in Cantor, Ohio and read about Art*o*mat in the newspaper. That same day, she tried one out at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art. For her, the concept seemed like “such a win-win for artists and for cigarette machines.” Dawn developed her art from another win-win situation: she lives near Lake Erie, and helps naturalists pick up litter at the shore and the beach treasures she finds there are in her earth work boxes. ...❖ photo page 23



Ian Anderson (*glass blower*)

Ian Anderson of Winston-Salem contributes to Art*o*mat for the “exposure and fun of being a part of something that could be really big...and also, belief in yourself can lead you away from failure.” For more of his work, please visit, puffinproductions.com.





Marc Archambault (writer) ↗

Marc is a writer and artist who currently lives in Bangkok, Thailand where he teaches English. He describes his contributions to Art*o*mat as “brightly colored little books filled with sweet short stories.” Marc found Art*o*mat appealing because “it was the most punk rock, populist way to distribute art I’d ever encountered.” His Thailand photographs can be seen at www.thunderjones.net

John Richard Blackburn (found objects) ↗

John Richard of Winston-Salem says, “The world is a beautiful place with many wonderful people. I enjoy the puzzle of life.” Also, “I failed 90% of all art classes I attended. To the teacher’s credit . . . I learned much through them.”

Clark Whittington (conceptual artist and founder of Art*o*mat)

Clark Whittington lives in Winston-Salem and says that he continues to contribute to Art*o*mat because he is the founder and feels “gratefully obligated.” He has had more than 20 solo shows throughout the country and has been a founding member of several art spaces. He is particularly proud of “Lest We Forget - A National Survey of Artists Responses to the Persian Gulf War” at The Armory Art Center in West Palm Beach, Florida in April 1998.

Clark graduated from Appalachian State University in 1988 with a degree in graphic design and a minor in marketing. “It was a time when I was very anti-war, a long-haired hippie sort of person. A good buddy was involved in Desert Storm before it was even a news story, and I just didn’t understand how he could do it. Finally I came to the point where I no longer saw evil in any side, but just two mindsets fighting. People aren’t bad, just the path can be freaky.”

He maintains his biggest claim to fame is a large photo of him holding a paper heart figure while being kissed by a girl classmate on the front page of The Concord Tribune, Valentine’s Day, 1972.



Artists in Cellophane is presently seeking artists to fill empty slots in all machines. Please visit their website at artomat.org. Art*o*mat® is a Registered Trademark of Artists in Cellophane. ✨