

PLATTFORM 10 Dan Peterman



Dan Peterman, *Love Podium*, 2006. Post-consumer reprocessed plastics, stainless steel hardware. Installed at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Klosterfelde, Berlin. Photography: Clements Photography & Design, Boston.

PLATFORM 10: Dan Peterman

Sited on deCordova's Main Entrance Plaza, Dan Peterman's *Love Podium* (2006) may share the grey-toned hues of the cobbles and natural stones that surround it, but its material make-up is anything but organic. The sculpture is fashioned from reprocessed plastics—a hallmark of the artist's ecologically savvy thirty-year practice—and has as much to do with strategies of responsible citizenship and environmental activism as it does fine art.

On a basic, visual level, *Love Podium* is a square platform with a small set of stairs on its front and back sides. These steps lead to two slightly larger-than-life-size lecterns, which look out in opposite directions and all but beg for bold proclamations to be shouted from their plastic planks. With this unique shape and stark design, the sculpture can come across as raw, silent, plain, and more than a little odd. After all, it is a most peculiar rostrum that suggests two people simultaneously stand side-by-side, shoulder to shoulder, and back to back as they face off against one another. But this uncanny object is rife with thoughtful symbolism and boasts a fascinating sculptural split personality of sorts.

In both form and title, *Love Podium* is a visual and verbal play on Victorian-era tête-a-tête loveseats, whose fused chairs face outwards in opposite directions to encourage whispered conversation and gossip between couples. While tête-a-têtes privilege intimacy, Peterman's *Love Podium* does quite the opposite. It positions pairs so that they communicate with a larger audience, thus turning the function of the tête-a-tête on its "head."

Love Podium is both a discrete, fine art object (with roots in the decorative arts, Surrealism, Minimalism and environmental art) and a suggested platform for participatory performance art (with origins in social sculpture and public art). *Love Podium*'s power and poignancy exists precisely in the intersection between these two identities. While the former of these personalities has been on display in gallery settings since 2006, the latter is making its debut here at deCordova. PLATFORM 10: DAN PETERMAN marks the inauguration of *Love Podium* as a bona fide stage for impassioned visitor debates and spoken word performances. Here at deCordova visitors are invited to observe and/or instigate the transformation of *Love Podium*

from a stand-alone object into a bold, sculptural call to action made possible by public participation.

Inspired by the spirit of the 2012 presidential election season, this special presentation of Peterman's *Love Podium* fosters dialogue about the important issues of our time and prompts audiences to consider the ramifications of speaking without being heard. Building on the idea that contemporary culture is rife with differing opinions and values, and that a true democracy is one in which freedom of expression is paramount and all voices are equal, Peterman's sculpture quite literally presents and problematizes what it means to be a polarized electorate.

Love Podium is not alone in signaling a problem with the way we speak, listen, and generally communicate with one another under the umbrella of the First Amendment (a right that many throughout the world still do not have). It is part of a lineage of social sculpture set forth by Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and Dan Graham (b. 1942) and finds a sculptural kindred spirit of sorts in the *Freedom of Expression National Monument* by Laurie Hawkinson, John Malpede, and Erika Rothenberg, originally installed at the Battery Park City Landfill in 1984 as part of a Creative Time public art initiative and redeployed in Foley Square during the 2004 election season.¹

A crowd-favorite, *Freedom* is a colossal bright red megaphone that rises six feet off the ground. A plaque near the sculpture reads, "You are cordially invited to step up and speak up."² Like *Love Podium*, *Freedom* offers, "a public forum for dialogue on the dynamics of free speech, power and powerlessness, and a multiplicity of social and cultural concerns" all the while directly confronting the public's sense that their voices have been silenced in far too many ways.³ This megaphone metaphor is a powerful one, as is the idea of amplifying one's voice through art.

Within contemporary sculpture and public art circles, diverse platforms for discourse like *Love Podium* have become more important and more popular than ever. Projects like Antony Gormley's *One & Other* (2009), a Fourth Plinth Commission in Trafalgar Square, London, or Elmgreen and Dragset's *It's Never Too Late To Say I'm Sorry* (2011–2012) and Amalia Pica's *Now Speak!* (2011), both featured in the Public Art Fund's 2012 outdoor exhibition *Common Ground* in New York's City Hall Plaza, evidence the prevalence of a desire to facilitate opportunities for pointed public expression through artistic engagement.⁴



LEFT: Laurie Hawkinson, John Malpede, and Erika Rothenberg, *Freedom of Expression National Monument*, 2004. Courtesy of Creative Time, NY. Photograph by Charlie Samuels. MIDDLE: Amalia Pica, *Now, Speak!*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist, Marc Foxx, and Public Art Fund, NY. Photograph by Jason Wyche. RIGHT: Elmgreen & Dragset, *It's Never too Late to Say Sorry*, 2012. Courtesy of the artists and Public Art Fund, NY. Photograph by Jason Wyche.



Dan Peterman, *Love Podium*, 2006. Installed at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Klosterfelde, Berlin. Photography: Clements Photography & Design, Boston. Performance by Robin Melendez and Mary Tinti.

Love Podium is part of this public art trajectory—a note-worthy fact given its origin as a purely poetic gallery-displayed object. In its present context, however, Peterman's platform creates a kind of double-sided speakers' corner at deCordova, a space designated for discourse but one that serves to help muddy the message rather than amplify or clarify it.

To activate *Love Podium*, two speakers stand on the platform and read aloud their opposing views on a single topic at the very same time. The experience is an amusing, transformative one for both speakers and listeners, underscoring the art of rhetoric as well as the benefits of close listening. It also highlights how *Love Podium* is a contradictory sculpture, one that invites debate but then sabotages debaters by not allowing them to take turns when delivering their zingers. Speakers are challenged to tune out the words of their opponent and focus on the recitation of their own text, while listeners struggle to parse out the voice and message of the individual speakers. Some speakers find themselves mimicking the cadence of their partner, while others raise their voices to be heard over the cacophony. The resulting onslaught of information is more disorienting than intelligible, thus underscoring the entertaining, yet wild futility of trying to talk over one another or listen to the arguments of two people who are doing just that.

There are sample pro/con texts available for public use, yet the Museum also encourages visitors to bring their own two person debates and recite them aloud on the platform. All topics are welcome and can range from local, hot-button issues to historical disagreements or even classic sports rivalries. The more diverse the verbal duels, the better *Love Podium* can fulfill its potential as a site for civic dialogue—one that is as much about the noisy, confusing pitfalls of a free-for-all debating style as it is about the guts of the issues. And, this dichotomy is directly related to the larger symbolism inherent in *Love Podium's* materiality as well as Peterman's practice as a whole.

Peterman's *Love Podium* is not just a platform from which to test our First Amendment rights, it also doubles as a stand-in for the artist's overall philosophical approach. Since the 1980s, Chicago-based Peterman has worked at the intersection of art and ecology. Through the creation of sculpture, installations, and functional objects that often rely upon reclaimed, reconfigured, or recycled materials, Peterman explores how art can be at once critical and poetic, socially engaged and subtly provocative. His refined reuse of post-consumer waste prompts conversations about the depletion of resources in contemporary society and the ways in which the public chooses to address or ignore our role in that consumption.



Dan Peterman, *Running Table*, 1997. 100 foot picnic table, post-consumer reprocessed plastics. Installation view: Grant Park, Chicago. Courtesy of the artist and Klosterfelde, Berlin.

Love Podium is part of a body of Peterman's work that reconfigures discarded plastic excess into furniture and utilitarian objects—many of which have been repurposed in public spaces throughout our cities. The resulting sculptures are functionally, aesthetically, and philosophically sound; operating as environmentally conscious artworks that foster community connection.

Take, for example, *Running Table*, an urban installation originally displayed in Chicago's Grant Park in 1997. This enormous, one-hundred-foot-long modular picnic table was formed from planks of recycled, post-consumer plastic scraps very similar to the kind used a decade later in *Love Podium*. At this table, which welcomed the public to dine together on a massive, communal scale, visitors could share a meal with the world, say hello to the stranger on their left, and make room for others to squeeze in on their right. *Running Table* shattered the standard protocols of impromptu, intimate picnic lunches and gave everyone a seat at the table—business and homeless person alike; all were welcome to Peterman's banquet.

But upon closer examination, the multiple personalities of Peterman's sculpture start to emerge. In many cases, community togetherness and conversation are made possible by Peterman's socially motivated sculptures. Paradoxically,

though, the reality of our collective, not-so-earth-friendly consumption is never far from mind thanks to the distinct materiality of these artworks. The sad truth is that the plastic Peterman recycles represents only a fraction of that which we regularly consume: the ratio is grossly disproportionate. In fact, works like *Love Podium* represent roughly the plastic consumption of a single American over a twelve month period. As *Frieze Magazine* critic Laurie Palmer points out, "making such psychological contradictions tangible is the level on which Peterman's work is most effective and disturbing."⁵ That sentiment is echoed by curator Raimar Stange who notes, "as objects that are both utilitarian and aesthetic, Peterman's works are equally at home within and outside of the fine-art context. More importantly, these qualities work together to serve Peterman's agenda: to make palatable the otherwise prohibitively unsavory truth of our ecological circumstances."⁶ To be sure, these qualities and more are present in *Love Podium*, a sculpture that melds artistic, social, and environmental issues with real-world opportunities for activism and imaginative re-use.

Through this first-of-its-kind presentation of *Love Podium*, Dan Peterman dares the deCordova public to step up and make their voices heard, regardless of how complicated that effort might seem. Some will find the experience empowering, others vexing. Both reactions are completely valid and, when taken together

with the conceptual nature of the object itself, help underscore the incongruous relationship between contemporary consumer consumption and responsible recycling.

Love Podium embodies, and thus helps us confront, so many different oppositions (or split personalities) in our midst—front/back, inside/outside, left/right, yes/no, pro/con, public/private, use/re-use—and suggests that the grey area between any binary indeed may be the sincerest place to begin a meaningful debate.

Mary M. Tinti
Koch Curatorial Fellow

¹ More information can be found online in the Creative Time web archives:
<http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2004/freedom/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ More information can be found online in the Public Art Fund web archives:
http://www.publicartfund.org/CommonGround/common_ground_exhibition.html

⁵ Laurie Palmer, "Dan Peterman," *Frieze Magazine* 36 (September–October 1997):
http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/dan_peterman

⁶ Raimar Stange, "Just Do It—Again and Again: Thoughts on the Aesthetic Practice of Dan Peterman," in *Plastic Economies* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and University of Illinois Press, 2004), 7.

Dan Peterman, *Love Podium*, 2006. Installed at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Klosterfelde, Berlin. Photography: Clements Photography & Design, Boston.



BIOGRAPHY

Dan Peterman (b. 1960) lives and works in Chicago. He received his BFA from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire in 1983 and his MFA from the University of Chicago in 1986. He has exhibited nationally and internationally, including at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; Venice Biennial, Italy; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands; Kunsthalle, Basel, Switzerland; Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, IL; among other venues. Peterman is an Associate Professor in the College of Architecture and the Arts at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a founder and director of the Experimental Station, an innovative, Chicago-based incubator of small-scale enterprise and cultural projects (www.experimentalstation.org). He is a recipient of the University Scholar Award from UIC; and has been awarded grants from Richard H. Driehaus Foundation and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation.

Dan Peterman is represented by Galerie Klosterfelde, Berlin, Germany and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY.

PROGRAMMING

In the Fall of 2012, Lexington High School Debate Team seniors Adam Hoffman and Jerry Chen (under the guidance of Sara Sanchez) and members of the Sylvan Speakers Toastmasters (under the leadership of President Seldron Geziben) graciously accepted the Museum's invitation to help us activate Peterman's sculpture in unique and dynamic ways. We are particularly grateful to these participants, who helped bring the social and activist aspects of *Love Podium* to life for the very first time. For future public readings on Dan Peterman's *Love Podium* please visit decordova.org.

PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of solo exhibitions focusing on work that engages with deCordova's unique architectural spaces and social, geographical, and physical location. The PLATFORM series is intended as a support for creativity and expression of new ideas, and as a catalyst for dialogue about contemporary art.

The 2011–2012 PLATFORM series is generously funded by James and Audrey Foster.

SEP 02, 2012–OCT 01, 2013

deCordova | Sculpture Park and Museum

51 Sandy Pond Road
Lincoln, Massachusetts 01773
781.259.8355 decordova.org

