



Cory Arcangel

Frank Benson

Sanford Biggers

Robert Boyd

Stephen Dean

Tony Fehler

Jennifer & Kevin McCoy

Adam McEwen

Jason Middlebrook

Alexandra Mir

New York

Interrupted

Wangechi Mutu

Paul Ramirez-Jonas

Mika Rottenberg

Hyungsuk Shin

Jean Shin

Julianne Swartz

Ivan Witenstein

## New York, Interrupted

**Anyone who lives in a great city**, whether it is London or Sao Paulo, Hong Kong or Tokyo, occasionally feels the utter incapacity to communicate anything beyond the most banal and superficial information to somebody who does not share that firsthand knowledge that comes from walking its streets every day for an endless string of years. I suspect this feeling of inadequacy may be because great cities are transformed so thoroughly and with such collective effort that one is regularly made aware of the ways one is changing along with them. Also, there are few things more difficult to describe than change, especially when you find yourself caught in its vortex.

The process by which great cities do undergo change, both of their own volition and through outside circumstances, is a theme that can hardly be avoided if the subject is New York artists presenting their work in Beijing during the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Exactly a hundred years ago, only a very tiny minority of highly prescient New Yorkers had any inkling of the cultural role their boisterous, clangoring city would play in the century to come. Commerce was the lens through which New York saw itself and its future impact on the rest of the world, while the arts were viewed as something imported from Europe, where such matters were far better understood. When, just after the turn of the century, the first President Roosevelt declared that the United States did not have any artists of its own, he was speaking not out of pride or shame, but from sheer pragmatics.

Of course, New York in 1906 did possess a healthy population of artists and writers, including some of lasting import, along with the well-heeled bohemian style modeled on imported Parisian modes of dress, behavior and clannishness. The city's proclivity towards private and mercantile patronage for the arts was already well established, as was its thriving local newspaper scene, which would lay the groundwork for New York's emergence as a telecommunications capital. Nonetheless, it was an unchallenged convention that Europe set the standards and tone for all artistic endeavors, while Boston and Philadelphia held onto their authority as older, more genteel, metropoli.

These reflections are worth bearing in mind at the present moment, when it appears as if New York's most recent expansionist wave of art-related commerce is levelling off, allowing a picture to emerge of how the city might look in another ten years. On the one hand, "New York art" has become an increasingly globalized phenomenon, with even more artists from every part of the world embracing its polyglot street life and fast-paced opportunism.

On the other hand, it has become possible to question whether New York is not in growing danger of becoming another Paris — a glittering metropolis of extreme privilege and luxury, where exquisite, expensive baubles change hands expertly and efficiently, and where art museums and other cultural institutions increasingly resemble the corporations on whose economic largesse they have come to depend. Still a city of commerce at its heart, New York also happens to be

one of the world's most expensive locales for living, making Berlin, Los Angeles and even Shanghai increasingly attractive to those artists who resist sacrificing their studio time in finding a job in order to pay rent. With only a modicum of luck, determination, and cleverness, one can still make a go of it in any of those three cities, whereas in New York today, a great more than ever before is required from those who arrive at its gates, looking for a way to enter.

Due in part to our collective skills as tradesmen, New York continues to hold onto its front rank as the place where more contemporary art is exhibited, bought and sold than anywhere else in the world. But it can no longer be automatically referred to as the place where the most contemporary art is produced, and the difference is becoming a crucial one. For example, a casual statistical breakdown of a single month's offerings in Chelsea indicates that of the top seventy galleries for emerging and mid-career artists, more than a third are currently presenting artwork that has been imported from other countries — a proportion which has been growing steadily over the past decade —, with an additional ten percent transported from elsewhere within the U.S. Even bearing in mind that these are approximate figures that fluctuate at different points of the gallery season, it is likely that with other factors shaying more or less the same, in another five or ten years New York, despite its growing population of working artists, will probably be importing more contemporary art than it produces.

New York galleries are rapidly expanding their programs to include more artists from China, for instance, to reflect how they see themselves becoming part of a rapidly expanding market in which China will play a much more significant role than it does today. While still in the single digits as a percentage of the overall market for new art, the principle of Chinese contemporary art has nonetheless been fervently embraced by Chelsea, perhaps even a bit too warmly at times. Although this new attitude can be seen as reflecting a genuine enthusiasm based on artistic open-mindedness, it is even more likely to be related to very

pragmatic calculations regarding the future of the contemporary art market inside China itself.

It is on this last point that the subject of an artistic dialogue between Beijing and New York begins to turn into something much more intriguing to curators outside China, to whom the burgeoning Beijing contemporary art scene tends to present itself as primarily a demonstration of the power of unlimited opportunity to determine the actions of the present. Given that the contemporary art market is one of the few economic sectors in which China has not yet made inroads to compare with its successes in manufacturing and agribusiness, how does one envision such a transformation taking place, and on which fronts will this first move from potential into reality?

Beijing's contemporary gallery scene, which is expanding at a velocity that already makes Chelsea appear to be moving in slow motion, also happens to be, by nearly any objective frame of analysis, a total mess. Professional standards are still quite low, artistic quality fluctuates wildly, certain ethical boundaries tend to be overlooked, local artists struggle to produce work that meets even minimal international standards of originality, and business, by all outward appearances, is anything but booming. Nonetheless, if this description reads like a recipe for disaster, it should actually be seen as precisely the opposite, since what is taking place in Beijing today is really a situation created to service one specific niche market: Chinese contemporary art collectors.

A statistic currently making the rounds of the art world quotes an unnamed economist estimating that the Chinese economy currently mints about six thousand brand-new millionaires every month. From this possibly fabricated statistic, all else follows quite logically, since it must also be assumed that Chinese contemporary art collectors will, during the next decade, not only expand exponentially in terms of sheer numbers, but also in terms of levels of sophistication. To return briefly to the Paris/New York comparison, it deserves mention that



great art cities in their decline also tend to create vast numbers of galleries that sell contemporary art that no museum curator will ever put on an institution's walls. A brief stroll along la Rive Gauche, West Broadway, or Canyon Road makes the best possible argument for the frequently ignored reality that once a city becomes famous for its local artists, there is really no limit to the number of opportunists ready to move in and take advantage of the clueless tourists who are bound to follow.

If that same rough standard could be applied to Beijing's gallery network at the present moment, one might conclude that what is being built there today is the infrastructure for a future art world that will soon rival and eventually eclipse New York's own. Whether or not Beijing will ever become the hotbed of local studio activity that one tends to associate with great art capitals is probably a less interesting question, since the more important point seems to be the direction that connoisseurship takes in China over the next decades.

While Chinese tradition does tend to favor domestic over imported art, such standards might not be so relevant anymore, since, in the spirit of free market competition, it makes more sense to create collections, both public and private, in which an understanding of how the rest of the world produces and disseminates new art is accorded a certain predominance. This is not to imply, even remotely, that Chinese contemporary art should take on more Western characteristics. In fact, since the most internationally respected Chinese artists working today are those whose work has maintained an essentially non-Western character, a greater understanding of how these artists fit into a global artistic context is probably essential for educating the Chinese artists of the future. It is hoped that the works of the seventeen New York artists in this exhibition will be received by the Beijing gallery audience in the spirit of the preceding remarks: part of an attempt to broaden the discussion currently taking place in China regarding the function of contemporary art, certainly as an economic factor, but

far more importantly as a cultural force that affects both people's inner lives and their public conversations about the world in which they live.

*New York, Interrupted* explores recent changes in the temperament of New York art. In contrast with the sweeping scale and bold intensity of the American art at the end of the last century, the works in *New York, Interrupted* are characterized by shared impressions of doubt, skepticism, and more than a touch of uncertainty regarding the future. The exhibition's title, *New York, Interrupted*, refers obliquely to the attacks that took place in the city five years ago, altering, among other things, New York's relationship to itself, to the rest of the country, and to the world at large. Some of those changes were apparent to nearly everybody right away, while others are only coming to light now, while still more will not show up until another decade or two have passed. In that sense, much of the art on view in *New York, Interrupted* reflects a somber moodiness that is very much in contrast with the fabled optimism of the American national character.

To a degree, this relative bleakness can also be understood as a manifestation of the frustration, bordering at times on despair, that millions of Americans are feeling after six years of the present U.S. administration's disastrous foreign policies, which have duped the electorate, alienated our allies, worsened global warming, and made a hash of the Geneva Conventions. Since even New Yorkers, who are famously tolerant in their world outlook, tend to consider the art world as an outpost of the radical fringe, it should come as little surprise that at the precise historical moment when it appears the country's (and, by extension, the world's) extended political nightmare may at last be drawing to a close, New York artists are producing work that brings to the forefront the past six years of pent-up aggression over the hijacking of our national values in an ill-defined 'war on terror.'

*New York, Interrupted* also refers to the city's future as the so-called art capital of the world, and to how little the New York art community today resembles the

New York art community of, say, the late 1980s, when the last sustained boom in contemporary art was also fueled by rapid rises in the stock and futures markets, against the background of a national deficit that is deep and getting deeper. Back then, fewer artists saw the direct economic benefits of rising prices for emerging artists, and intensified competition among collectors to acquire the works of the most sought-after. Today, with so many more galleries, collectors and art fairs figuring into the equation than twenty years ago, the art world counts for a larger economic base than it ever has before, with the result being that more artists benefit from the sales of their works, and even more come to New York believing they can beat the odds.

Although it would be difficult to label *New York, Interrupted* a thematic exhibition in the generally accepted use of the term, many of the works included in it have nonetheless been either created especially for the exhibition, or are being seen in public for the first time. This decision on the part of so many artists to respond to my invitation by producing something which would be a kind of experiment, in a context that is wholly unfamiliar to them, seems to me indicative of one aspect of the local artistic character that has long been the norm, but less emphatically so in recent years: the hunger for taking risks. Having an artistic experiment fail gloriously has always been the price of innovation, and few artists with any influence are strangers to the anxiety that comes along with not knowing whether or not one has achieved one's goals. For the present occasion, the opportunity to realize works that existed only in their creators' respective imaginations until a few months ago is a telling reminder that the most important challenge for every artist is to always make something new.

This first group of new works includes a multi-channel video installation by Sanford Biggers, based on video footage of a disco ball scattering shards of light around an empty room. Once his footage has been shot and edited, and the disco ball replaced by projectors, the resulting illusion is meant to trail the ghostly

light patterns across the darkened walls, suggesting the atmosphere of a nightclub that only exists in the viewer's memory. Biggers installation, which specifically refers to the absence of the very thing that brought it into being, shares a measure of poignancy with the nearby installation of 'mosaic' rubble by Jason Middlebrook. Caught between twin cycles of creation and destruction, Middlebrook's piece is characteristic of the apocalyptic spirit of much of his art, in which a sense of urgency and pessimism over the fate of the planet is tempered by an idealistic faith in the capacity of art to bring about enlightened behavior, even if only for those relative few who look to it for deeper significance.

A site-specific installation of found materials by Tony Feher is typically characterized by his deployment of such modest, quotidian materials as painter's tape or empty soda bottles to create subtle visual essays that deal with the fleeting qualities of light and color as much as with the forms and shapes that constitute the installations' physical impact in the exhibition. Feher's interest in such unassuming materials is motivated in part by his interest in the indirect transformations that they have on their immediate visual environment. A quite different understanding of the meanings of recycled materials is generated by Hyungsub Shin's wall of metallic fish made from standard kitchen supplies. To Shin, it is the idea of a built-in ambiguity to all objects which is attractive, and even when he seems to be concealing the original function of each component-object, it usually re-emerges as an 'evolutionary' adaptation to its altered set of circumstances.

It is worth noting that a number of works in the exhibition draw off of music as a point of reference, and there are probably a number of reasons why this is the case. The broadest explanation has to do with music's capacity for crossing cultural boundaries with much less effort than other art forms, and thereby suitable for an exhibition in which literary or topical references may not be as inclusive. Another suggested reason for why music may be so prominent in this exhibition

has to do with the word 'Interrupted,' with its implicit reference to a temporal framework. One of the things we know about interrupting a conversation or a song is that returning to the original thread or melody is never quite the same. The mere fact of being interrupted seems to alter our perception of time's flow forward, making music a rich source of metaphor for individual and collective response to change on a bigger scale.

Cory Arcangel's two-channel video, *Sweet Sixteen*, is actually a musical composition based on an elementary device: two variant music video takes of the sixteen bar guitar solo that forms the introduction to Guns 'n' Roses' song 'Sweet Child of Mine,' one slightly longer than the other, played side by side, so that the diverging tracks form a new piece of music, one that sounds a great deal like the minimalist compositions of Steve Reich. Julianne Swartz' ten-meter-length *Music Box* sound sculpture literally transforms the exaggerated length of the gallery space into an elongated ear trumpet. Conveying the sound of a tiny music box from source to listener through a long aluminum funnel that gradually widens as it lengthens, Swartz begins from the premise that what finally reaches our ears is quite altered from its miniaturized source, and the newly enriched sound is also somehow muffled, as if from the echo of a distant parade.

In Robert Boyd's apocalyptic three-channel video, 'Xanadu', we are able to witness the end of the world as it might be art-directed by members of one of the more apocalypse-obsessed evangelical Christian denominations. Using a rapid-montage technique that crams thousands of images — from CNN news clips to momentary glimpses of Olivia Newton-John lip-synching the title song — into a work the length of three disco-oriented dance songs, Boyd's relentless accumulation of visual evidence, marshalled to demonstrate that our leaders are dutifully and piously bringing about the destruction of the planet, is a millennial tour de force that seems equal parts political warning, media critique and spoof. Not far from this sensibility is Stephen Dean's video of an American demolition derby in

excruciating closeup. As the newest installment in the artist's series of investigations into public celebrations, in which the focus comes across as being more about generating an abstract orgy of colors and textures than the actual god being venerated.

A new series of watercolors by Ivan Witenstein continues this artist's charged and even anguished dissection of the American soul, as exemplified by the ways in which the acts and principles of a courageous few are often scapegoated for the sake of a temporary, and often ill-suited, truce. Through sculpture as much as drawing, Witenstein's art grapples directly with some of the most sensitive social issues — those involving sex, race, religion, gender and patriotism — while always framing his art in the universal language of what it means to be merely human.

A suite of 'dysfunctional' sculptures by Frank Benson, in which certain key strategies of minimalism are brought to bear on the kitsch, the damaged, and the discarded, explores the ways in which the designation of 'art' can become more about habits of perception than the embodiment of tangible social values. By reversing the U.S. flag, elaborately bending a piece of otherwise mundane construction board, or showing us how a gourd can be transformed into a swan (or is it vice versa?), Benson produces hybrid objects that behave according to a script that requires them to be deadpan, unobtrusive, and completely lacking the appearance of possessing any transcendental meanings.

Jennifer & Kevin McCoy cinematic *Dream Sequence* video installation is a projection that incorporates real-time edits drawn from a series of miniature video cameras placed throughout the scale-model 'scenography' installed at the room's center. As tiny plastic figurines move in and out of the camera's focus, and the point of view jumps from one corner of the set to the other, we begin constructing a narrative without needing any further introduction to the characters' specific lives. In Mika Rottenberg's offbeat video-sculpture, *Tropical Paradise*, one of

only a very few installations which the artist has created to date, the mundane labors of a few central characters are plotted and edited with a musical precision, and presented as part of a structure that copies some aspects of the space in which the video was filmed. Rottenberg's work taps into a set of collective anxieties about machines that have been part of moving pictures since Chaplin, but her characters are endowed with a striking individualism that forms a humorous counterpoint to the somewhat discouraging circumstances of their elusive but nonetheless degrading occupation.

Wangechi Mutu's haunting *Throne* sculpture is a fragment of one the artist's recent series of installations, in which sculptural objects, videos, drawings, and room-scale transformations are deftly interwoven into a kind of tableau that fuses historical, fictitious and autobiographical elements into a rich, multi-sensorial experience. While referencing childhood, pomposity, and decadence, the work seems most concerned with death, in particular the way that industrialized societies manage to justify the wars, genocides and famines in subSaharan Africa by simply acting as if they didn't exist. In their more explicit engagement with death, Adam McEwen's spurious obituaries of famous people hold up a disturbing reflection of a society obsessed with the fleeting values of fame and celebrity. Drawing off a well-known practice on the part of major newspapers, of keeping the essential copy of most celebrity's future obituaries on hand so that only the circumstances of their death need to be reported once the event actually takes place. Since all of these extremely famous people are still alive, McEwen has not so much wished their death upon them as shattered the ironclad social conventions by which somebody's death is unquestioningly transformed into 'news.'

Aleksandra Mir's disorienting photo-installation, *Hello*, now several years old, plays with the notion of our interconnectedness by way of a photographic demonstration. *Hello*, which was produced in different versions for each venue,

is a linear sequence of more than two hundred fifty photographs, drawn from private sources as well as the public domain, in each of which a minimum of two people are facing the camera. For every pair in the sequence, the person on the right in each photo is always the same as the person on the left, giving the partial impression that the artist's friends and acquaintances are intimately connected with highly recognizable politicians, celebrities, or other luminaries.

One of the most poignant works in the exhibition is *Armed*, Jean Shin's wall installation of used, deconstructed military uniforms. Given personally to the artist by individual members of a military veterans' association located in her Brooklyn neighborhood, each fragment of the wall installation was part of that person's own uniform. Shown as a large field of colors, textures, and shapes, with only muted references to the subject of war, *Armed* forces us to reflect on the contrast between the individual serviceman's life and, as a stark contrast, the rigorous conformity of the military, in which the force of a collective mindset functions in a part as a counterweight to the overwhelming experience sadness and grief whenever one of the flesh-and-blood persons in that collective body loses his or her life.

Dan Cameron, Curator



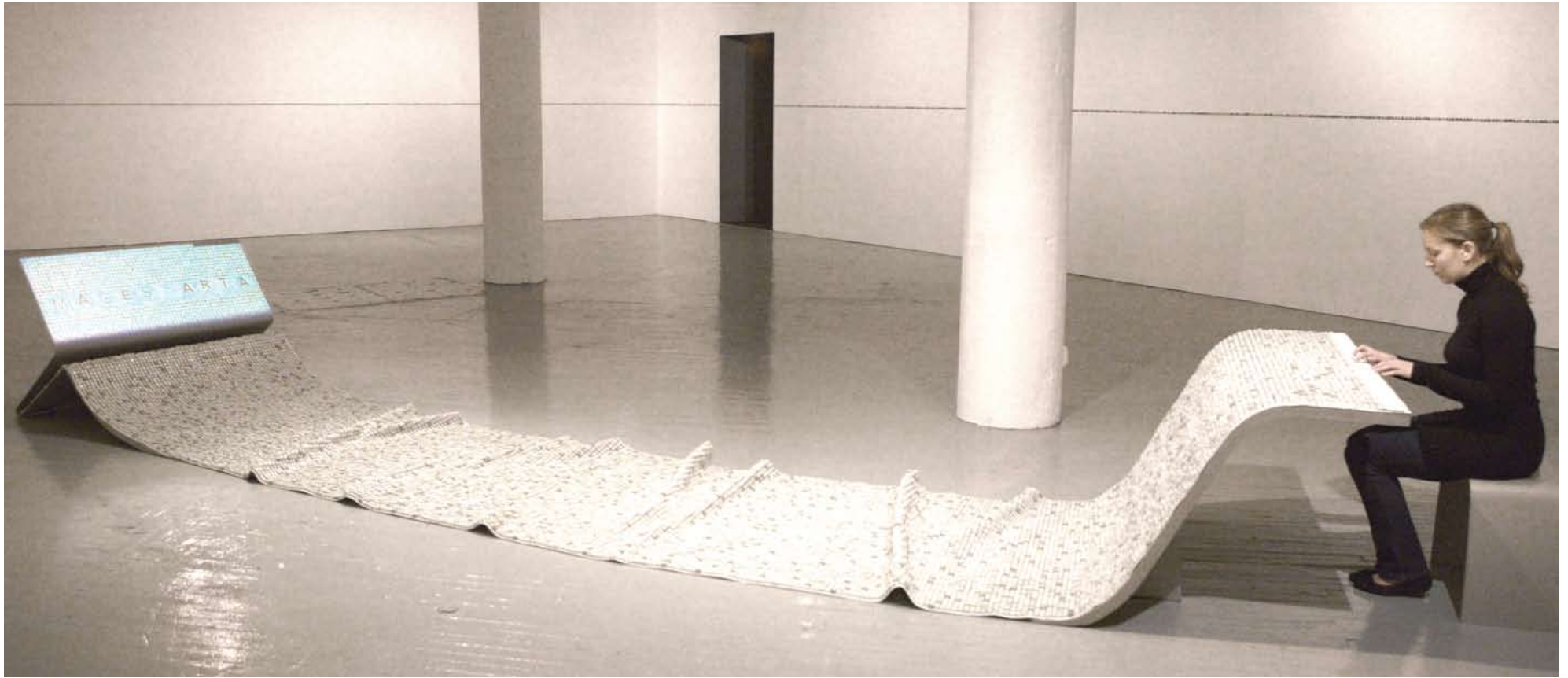


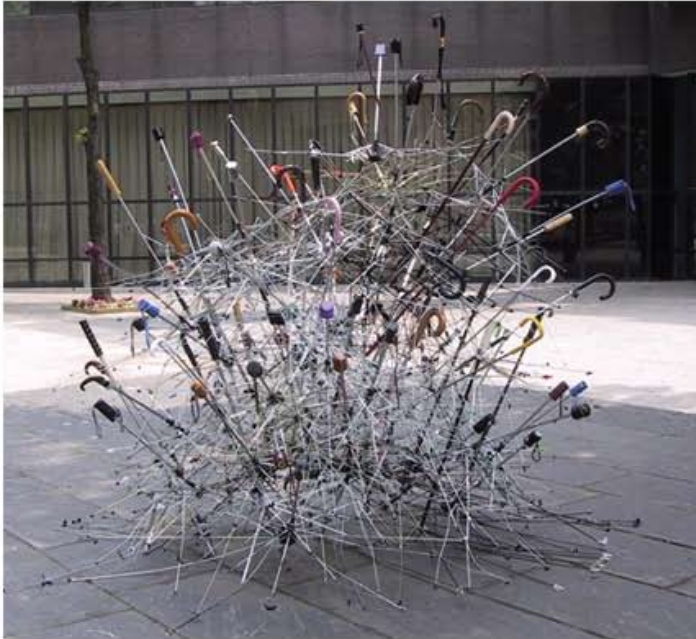
**TEXTile**

2006

22,528 recycled computer keycaps and  
192 custom keycaps, high performance laminate  
fabric, customized active keyboard and  
interactive software, video projection and  
painted aluminum armature  
31 x 48 x 245 inches.







72 Umbrellas Stripped Bare  
2001  
Broken umbrellas thread and cables  
50 x 6 x 6 feet



Chance City  
2001-2004  
\$21,496 worth of discarded lottery tickets  
(no adhesive)  
6 x 8 feet

