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Art Down the Mississippi. At Least, That's the Plan.



Chicken John, who helped to assemble the raft.

Allen Brisson-Smith for The New York Times

By David Carr

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MINNEAPOLIS, Aug. 5 — If all goes as planned, and that is no sure bet, an unlikely crew on an improbable craft will amble the Mississippi for the next month, spreading culture and chaos downriver.

For more than a week, the “Miss Rockaway Armada” — a few dozen self-selected artists from Manhattan, Brooklyn, Seattle, San Francisco and beyond — has toiled here on the banks of the Mississippi River, assembling salvage wood and cadged Styrofoam into three interconnected rafts, each 20 feet long.

Factor in a few tag-along rafts, and the ensemble piece has the vague shape of a giant fish. It is supposed to motor down the river with two Volkswagen Rabbit engines converted to biodiesel that are also capable of running on vegetable oil.

It has been a huge, oft-delayed undertaking. The crew was going to leave around Aug. 1, then later in the week, then Saturday for sure.

[Sunday came and went. After a successful test float Monday night, the crew decided all systems were go, according to A'yen Tran, an occasional spokeswoman, and their departure, she said, was imminent. But you never know.]

Theoretically, the crew plans to stop in various river towns to give workshops on everything from silkscreening to power tools and put on a performance — a kind of punk-rock musical variety show — followed by a dance party. They have no money, less expertise and nothing by way of permits. Imagine if Don Quixote, Salvador Dalí and Che Guevara collaborated on a floating medicine show. It is hard to say what the Coast Guard, which governs the river, will say when it first lays eyes on the spectacle.

Across the river from the raft-building site was a massive salvage yard with cranes and crushers, a thudding counterpoint to the artists' bid to conjure discarded piles of junk into a vessel that will sail hundreds of miles to St. Louis over the course of the month. (Those who are willing will remain on the raft or some part of it and continue to New Orleans.)

It seems like a perfectly dumb idea, but it's hard not to be charmed by the whole enterprise. Maybe it's one of the tag-along rafts, the one with dozens of speakers fashioned from truck tires, industrial blowers and dorm fridges, all flanking a bicycle-powered Ferris wheel. Mike Houston was slathering it all with lacquer, because, he said, "Things always look better shiny."

It is a summer caper built on magical realism, with the realism part intruding often enough to put the endeavor behind a schedule no one cared about much in the first place.

“This is a logistical nightmare, but it is a set of problems I want,” said Jeff Stark, one of the trip’s organizers. “There is very real value in people having a primary experience, the experience of making something beautiful and improbable.”

It began last winter with a notice on the Web site missrockaway.org. “We grew up in small towns,” it read. “We remember the bookmobile and the punk rock band that seeded little pieces of something else. And now, even though we moved to big cities and found people like us, we still live in a country that fights wars so it can consume more. We are taking the urge to flee and heading for the center. We want to meet people who aren’t like us. We want to meet ourselves at age 16.”

The invitation nicely mixes a kind of artistic imperialism — “Hey, look, Ma, blue states bringing culture to the red ones” — with a Dadaist emphasis on fun as an artistic objective. It yielded a temporary community in the spirit of — and including people from — the Barnstormers, the Madagascar Institute, the Floating Neutrinos, the Toyshop Collective, the Infernal Noise Brigade and the Amateurs, artist collectives all.

Apart from a commitment to recycled materials and group decision-making, there is no organizing principle to the endeavor. A shore dappled with scrawled blueprints on discarded sheetrock, tarps make of orphan Manhattan umbrellas, abandoned toys, moon stencils and bicycle parts suggested disparate takes on what the trip is for.

There will be plenty of togetherness on the river, but in case the intimacy overwhelms, there will be a Temple of Solitude, a small orphan raft dragging behind with a hammock with room for just one or two.

In late July, after the crew had loaded up a bus and a trailer of scrap materials gathered on the streets of New York to hit the road, they were turned away from the Holland Tunnel. When they retreated back toward the Verrazano Bridge via Brooklyn, an axle broke on the trailer under the Brooklyn Bridge, 20 minutes into the trip.

It has been sort of like that since, but there are few hissy fits, and little sign of factionalism. The crews work on schedules and assignments known only to them, with progress coming of its own accord in a temporary village just down from the Camden Bridge in Minneapolis, where John Holmberg, a river rat with a sprawling place on the Mississippi, allowed the crew to set up shop and sleep on his houseboats.

Over the course of five days, piles of junk in ad-hoc shops up by his house slowly made their way down to the river and seemed to morph organically into rafts.

Zoë Mizuho, a dancer for a punk rock marching band, put up a cross support for the second deck of the performance raft. Harrison, the resident Lost Boy who cracked wise about everything and said he used no last name, grabbed a tool near the house, then bounced on a trampoline on the way to the docks. Near the house, Alexis McDonough Pope and Brandy Gump were putting together a pedal-powered washing machine.

“We were at the Hard Times cafe in Minneapolis, and suddenly this tub just manifested itself behind the place, next to a dead squirrel,” Ms. Gump explained as she pushed down on the makeshift gear so Ms. Pope could bolt it together.

Philip Harder, a Minneapolis filmmaker who lives a few houses away, had learned about the group on the Web and contacted it to see if he could help it get situated.

“What I really liked about what they were doing is that they made it very clear that they had no idea what they were doing,” he said.

The crew is not short on credentials, but none have much to do with raft-building or river navigation. Mr. Stark organized the Idiotarod, a much-heralded shopping-cart race in New York City; the artist known as Swoon has several pieces in the “Printmaking Now” show at the Museum of Modern Art.

Ledia Carroll, an artist from Texas, has produced some high-profile environmental pieces, but is working on feeding the crew right now. “Would you like a Dumpster-dive bagel?” she asked a visitor sweetly. Her partner, Paul Cesewski, is the builder of the bicycle-powered Ferris wheel and has created improbable fun machines at the Burning Man festival and elsewhere.

“Floating Man” would have a nice ring as a title for this expedition if so much of the muscle and enterprise were not coming from women. Navigating several tons of raft down a river full of locks and barges seems dicier than building an ecstatic village in the Nevada desert. They have some aces in the hole: Shawn Kelley has not only sailed a raft down the Mississippi, but she also took it to Cuba for good measure.

“My biggest concern is people falling off the raft,” said Ms. Kelley, who has been with the Floating Neutrinos since she was 17. Now in her 20’s, she is one of the few people here who has spent much time off asphalt.

And then there’s Chicken John, a longtime adventurer and circus man, a necessary figure. “Chicken John is the king of Jakey design,” Mr. Stark explained. “It was his bus that brought us here, and he is the one who is figuring out how to make these motors work.”

Mostly, Chicken John plays the heavy who has little taste for the whole collective approach. He and his buddy Nick Bindbeutel were piecing together the engines based on a design Chicken John saw in Thailand. When it became clear that the water pump was misplaced, Mr. Stark mentioned that “we decided it would work here.”

Chicken John said, “Why is it always ‘we’ when something goes wrong?”

A cynical optimist, he said he would make sure there was power — the converted engines will run on fryer grease, theoretically — to make the trip, but he would not join the voyage. “I’m needed elsewhere.”

“This is the best-case scenario,” he said, rising from an engine he had been working on. “Nobody knows what they are doing, they don’t work smart, but none of them have left.”

Later he updated a friend on the telephone: “We are ensconced in a small makeshift refugee village on the river, engaged in a form of indentured servitude, and I’m not sure when they are leaving.”

Swoon, who played a large role in organizing the group, designed the fabricated elements on top of the raft. She and Mike Ross, who has built large-scale sculptures before, stared at one of the wooden models that made the trip from New York, much worse for the wear. They discussed the load-bearing capabilities of a spar that formed part of a symbolic fish design intended to grace an end of one of the rafts.

“You have to design it for an unruly group,” Mr. Ross said. “Someone is bound to get drunk and climb up on it at some point,” he said, pausing. “It might be me, actually.”

As the rafts took shape, some people on a passing pontoon stared from a distance but did not approach for a closer look. Not so for Ann Nowara, an elderly neighbor who was leaning on a swingset just up the bank. “Wow, they really got something here,” she said. “What is it?”

There really was no telling. Between one of the cooks nearly slicing off her finger, waterlogged Styrofoam and toileting logistics that are not quite ironed out, the adventure had begun in earnest well before the craft was even launched.

No matter. Hope floats, after all, so no reason to expect a raft built out of garbage and good intentions won't do the same thing.