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## The Village People Dog Dish Ark

The geniuses behind Everyday Art Assignments want the city to do its homework

BY **ROBERT ISENBERG**

We are scanning the shelves in the back of Goodwill. We need building materials. We've determined what won't work: mugs, wine glasses, a microwave door. Toasters are out, and so is the old Commodore 64 Floppy Disc holder with the transparent lid. We need something more tangible, like -- *that*. A dog food bowl, white, made from industrial-strength plastic. Will it float? Oh, it better float. Buoyancy is key.

The mast should be made from something solid, but not heavy, because our boat is modest; our principle concern, now that it won't sink, is that it will tip over. Not that it's going anywhere. That's not the point. But it would be nice if our little boat was at least functional, to create the illusion that it could venture downriver, to be discovered one day by a curious fisherman with an eye for concept art. We settle for a candlestick holder, this weird, New-Agey metal thing with a round, flat bottom.

Now for the sail. Really we could use anything, but we remember, from a previous trip to Goodwill, that there was this hysterical Village People LP lying in a stack, and we wanted to pick it up, just for the novelty of owning a Village People record, but novelty doesn't justify everything. Now we have a reason -- we need a sail. We flip through the vinyls, at first missing it -- who would *buy* such a thing, besides us? -- but then there it is. The Village People smile at us. We smile back.

Next stop, CVS. We're going to need a bar of soap.

If you've never sound random second-hand stuff in Goodwill with the intention of putting together an avant-garde pop art project, you probably haven't visited [www.everydayart.org](http://www.everydayart.org), the official Web site of Everyday Art Assignments. Established as a grassroots public arts initiative, this Sprout Fund-sponsored event is open to visual artists, amateur sculptors, art teachers, and, well, *you*. Throughout May and June, anyone can participate, anytime, anywhere.

"When I say it's a collaborative project, it really is," says Cheryl Capezzuti, founder of Everyday Art Assignments. "Ideally, I'd want a contribution from everyone in the city. I want a gallery of 10,000 exhibitors, or a million."

You may not know the name Cheryl Capezzuti, but her double life as "The Lint Lady" is well known. For three years, the Pittsburgh native ran art workshops at Duds 'n' Suds, where visitors could sculpt figurines out of ordinary laundry lint. At 34, Capezzuti is leading perhaps the most everyman art project since Dada.

Here's how it works: Web surfers find a list of 15 artists handpicked by Capezzuti. Many are the friends and colleagues she has met since making an artistic splash in Pittsburgh, but others are responders to an ad she ran in the city's weeklies. Click on an artist's picture and an artistic assignment will appear; the assignment is a bit like middle school homework, requiring scissors and markers and personal creativity. For example, Assignment #9 is to find old clothes and snip them into five-by-five-inch squares; then you sew them together into a chaotically patterned quilt. Entitled the "Fiber Jambalaya," this assignment is the brainchild of Christine Bethea, a 15-year veteran of the fiber arts circuit.

When participants complete their projects, they send their works to Capezzuti to be "graded." The Report Card page lists all the visitors who have contributed to the project; there are 22 listed so far, minus our forthcoming boat.

The most prolific contributor is Peggy Willard, who is attempting to complete all 15 assignments -- *in the order that they are listed*. One project, assigned by the poet and mixed-media artist Sarah E. J. Williams, prescribes artists to write a love letter to someone they have never formally met. Willard wrote a letter to bus driver, expressing gratitude for safe navigation: "...the promise is there, renewed each morning with the arrival of each bright yellow bus...you are the vanguard who greets us all ..."

"I'm interested in the connection between arts and everyday life," Capezzuti remarks. "I really like to meet people who are different from myself. Working on your own, you can only do so many things."

The Lint Lady isn't shy about her intentions; in one section of her Web site, Capezzuti invites visitors to lunch with the artists: "It's easy. Ask [the artists] good questions and then tell us about their answers. Just remember to pick up the tab."

We have decided to take on two projects, Assignments #10 and #12. The former was designed by local artist Jan Loney, entitled "River Voyage." Loney asks that participants build miniature boats out of nontraditional boat-building materials. Shipwrights are encouraged to use natural ingredients, but Loney allows for manmade products as well. We must then write a letter to an acquaintance whom we can't readily reach -- these people might be far away, or their phones have been shut off, or maybe they're dead. In any event, the note is a vital addition.

Assignment #12 is Capezzuti's own; she claims that when she was young, members of her family would exchange model elephants, signifying good luck in hard times. Capezzuti assigns artists to sculpt their own elephants; the only stipulation is that it cannot measure more than four inches in any direction.

This is where the soap comes into play. We pick up a bar of Irish Spring at CVS; it seems fitting that this brand should go under the knife. We return home with our stash, along with two tubes of Super Glue -- not that we'll need two tubes, but it's a nice thing to have around the house. We unwrap the soap, unsheathe the outdoorsman's knife we bought at a South Dakotan pancake house and start slicing away at the bar.

We have never carved before and we're a little surprised at how easy it is. First a large, rough-looking trunk emerges from the main body, then four blocky legs appear. We round off the hard edges with small, gentle cuts, then etch ears and eyes into the soap. We finish the job with a splash of water, which softens the surface and clears away stray shavings.

We examine the result, impressed at our unexpected handiwork. We consider taking this on full-time. Who wouldn't want a miniature elephant? We could make

a killing at this. And it would be useful if we ever go to prison.

The boat is another story. As we've been carving, we've been waiting for the Super Glue to dry. We've already attached the mast to the body of the boat; we considered drawing all sorts of strange optical patterns around the bow and stern but thought better of it; the simple off-white will please the eye as the boat bobs on the water. Since the edges of the dog dish are rounded off, the boat can only meander across the water; even if there was some tiny captain to steer it, there's no rudder, no discernible decks. It begins to dawn on us that this isn't so much a boat, or even a raft, but more of an ark. An ark that preserves a sentiment between two long separated acquaintances -- and the memory of funky 1970s beats. We consider sculpting a second elephant and maybe some zebras, but the reference might be too heavy-handed. And together they'd certainly overburden the hull. And we can't spare the soap.

The glue has dried perfectly, so we take out the Village People LP and start to cut it apart. We're not sure of the statement we're trying to make -- that art can beget crazy, disco-style good times? -- but we'd like to retain the logo and the faces of the band members. If anyone asks, we'll call it a tribute ark.

We have to debate about the letter. Most of the people we don't call are still reachable; they're just busy. So we think back and recall Josh Banta, a friendly guy we met back in college. We write him the following note:

*Dear Josh Banta -- Hope you get this. Been a while. Did you ever get that chemistry degree? Does that make you a chemistrator? Ha-ha, just kidding. Give us a call. XOXO.*

Josh probably won't see this note. The assignment doesn't ask that we send it adrift, just that we build it. But it would just be tacky to assemble a boat and then not grant it a maiden voyage. So as we raise the Village People sails -- or rather fasten them to the candleholder with Scotch tape -- we decide to drive to Oakland, and let the boat loose on the reflecting pool beneath the Panther Hollow Bridge.

It's a chilly afternoon when we arrive, and the road doesn't extend to the water's edge, so we walk through some bushes, hop the railroad tracks, cross a small wooden bridge. When we arrive, there's no one around, just some construction vehicles a few hundred yards away. We tested the ark in our bathtub and it floated just fine, but it's windy today and the pond is irrigated by several drainage points that puncture the edges.

The joy of Everyday Art Assignments is that, for most people, these assignments are *not* everyday activities. Without Capezzuti's colleagues to offer ideas, most of us wouldn't think of building an ark out of a dog dish. We take a breath, wishing there was a champagne bottle to smash. We set the vessel in the water; the skin of the pond ripples as the ark settles into place. The ark bounces a moment, then evens, then stops, drifting a few inches as the tiny current carries it away.

We watch the boat for awhile; we probably won't complete all 15 assignments -- and certainly not before the final deadline, when, on June 26, the artists will gather at the Sprout Fund's Hot House showcase and present their opuses. But in the meantime, just these two have been invigorating. Eventually we pluck the boat -- ark, whatever -- out of the water and lay in the grass, and we consider for the first time writing a love letter to that deli worker who toasts our bagels every morning. She'd appreciate that.

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