

Jaeger finds new quarters for art

by Larry Parnass | Daily Hampshire Gazette

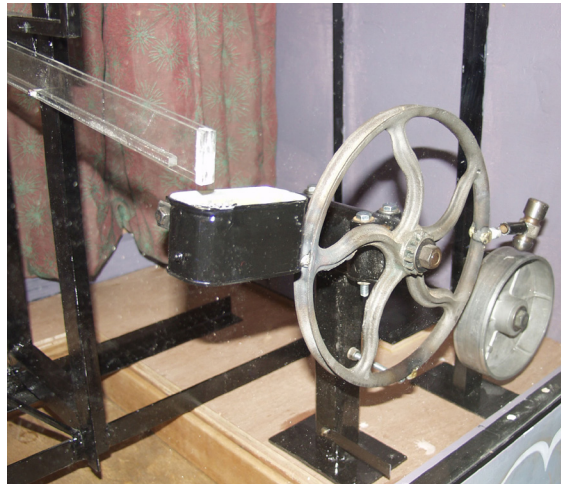
Artists who play finders-keepers with the materials they use have penciled a new element onto the periodic table. According to Luke Jaeger, a practitioner, the stuff they find by trash barrels and at dumps is “obtainium.”

Jaeger’s newest work positively glows with it.

Unless the temperature is lethal, he’ll be outside the Academy of Music next Sunday, at the fourth event of the Five Sundays in February series, babysitting a kinetic sculpture that makes a little art and makes a little money.

Two years ago, Jaeger won a \$416 grant from the Northampton Arts Council to fashion a coin-operated sculpture. At the time, the arts council, like all in the state, had suffered a reversal, losing two-thirds of its state funding. “I thought this was a way for them to come out swinging,” Jaeger said of the group.

The work he’s now just finished, “Fundraiser,” is poised to start paying the council back on its investment. For 50 cents, deposited in any combination of coins, a user gets to see that change ride in an aluminum bucket up a black conveyor belt. It all happens inside a wooden box on wheels that’s about 5 feet high and 5 feet wide.



The coins then fall into a clear plastic sorting device that causes them to roll either back to the original hopper, or down into a converted Spam can that, when it becomes heavy enough with contributions, prompts a hammer to strike a bell. Windows on three sides afford views of the Rube Goldberg-like action.

Jaeger, a Northampton artist who works with arts students at Hampshire College, agrees that a metaphor goes into motion — maybe a few of them — as those coins chug uphill.

The bell doesn’t ring every time, for instance.

“First of all,” he said the other day, as a passerby tested his sculpture inside the city’s Memorial Hall, “art isn’t always efficient.”

And it isn’t generally about big sums.

“If you put two quarters into this machine, you’ve probably doubled your annual contribution to the arts as an American taxpayer,” he said. I more than quintupled my contribution last week. A few of my quarters made it all the way down to the old Spam can and were tipped out onto a wooden drawer at the bottom of “Fundraiser.”

The drawer is closed with a steel padlock — keys for which are held by the arts council and the artist.

“I’d love to see a ton of quarters in there,” Jaeger said, pointing through the plastic window at the front of “Fundraiser” into the drawer. “It adds up. It’s incremental.” And in that, he saw another

mechanized moral: “It takes more than one person’s effort to ring the bell — it’s a group effort.”

Seen another way, the sculpture pokes fun at the idea, held by many, that a reliable measure of an art work’s worth is its ability to make money. Jaeger’s piece generates cash every time it’s touched.

About then, the city’s mayor, Clare Higgins, happened by with a wad of budget documents in her arms. Could a gizmo like this, she was asked, help the city out of its financial hole?

“Do they make coins worth a million dollars?” she asked.

Speaking of priceless, there’s that business of “obtainium.”

Jaeger’s “Fundraiser” uses a coin mechanism he took out of an old Coke machine. It contains gears from an exercise bike (“On trash night, just drive around,” he counsels), a pulley wheel found in a barn and of course that Spam can. A curtain that hangs behind the mechanism was donated by Lynn Bertrand.

The lettering and design on the outside was done by Amy Johnquest of Ashfield, who specializes in carnival and side show settings. Others who helped out were Gary Hartwell, Rich Heiman, John Kosakowski, John Lombard, Greg Young and the artist’s wife, Shoshana Marchand.

“Fundraiser” is Jaeger’s second coin-operated kinetic sculpture. The first, “Wayback,” was displayed at the Revolving Museum in Lowell last summer. The artist hopes to make many more of these. Someday, he’d like to curate an exhibit filled with them.

“I love building things and I love working with found objects and things that move,” he said.

Jaeger is now looking for a permanent home for the sculpture — some place where it can be visible and safe. It will likely hit the road in good weather, rolling up to public events in the city, where it can offer a few seconds of mechanical motion — and maybe even a slight ding — in exchange for hard currency for the arts.

